

TACTUAL POÏESIS: MATERIAL TRANSLATION  
IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

by

Julie Phillips Brown

August 2011

© 2011 Julie Phillips Brown

# TACTUAL POÏESIS: MATERIAL TRANSLATION IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S POETRY

Julie Phillips Brown, Ph. D.

Cornell University 2011

Critical studies of literature and the arts have long emphasized visual comparisons between the two-dimensional spaces of the page and the canvas, often to the exclusion of other senses, dimensions, and media. *Tactual Poïesis* develops an expanded vocabulary for how to read literature and the arts through attention to tactile, multi-dimensional innovations in the poetry of Susan Howe, Cecilia Vicuña, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. As contemporary poets continue to broaden the material, tactile dimensions of their writing, an equal expansion in critical discourse becomes necessary. For Howe, Vicuña, and Cha, ordinary textual conditions no longer satisfy—the poem must be seen, heard, and felt. At the heart of each poet's formal innovation is the potential for *tactual poïesis*: a rewriting of history and a reordering of the contemporary world through poetic and readerly processes that are, literally, hands-on. I argue that it is precisely a poem's tactility that makes its text, and the histories contained therein, actual, present, and physical—and therefore, subject to manipulation by both poet and reader. The histories these poets revise are numerous and far-ranging: from personal, familial narratives in Howe's *The Midnight* and Cha's *Dictee*, to cultural and national memories in *Dictee* and Vicuña's *cloud-net*, to linguistic and literary conventions in all three works together.

My first chapter examines Howe's textual and visual collage in *The Midnight* as an elegiac performance, whereby the poet transforms the book into a costumed extension of her own body. This transformation animates the text from within and activates an intermediate space between the living and the dead. My second chapter argues that Vicuña's *cloud-net* relies on bodily contact between poet, reader, and text to open the "trans": a transitive space between the present and an earlier time prior to globalization, global warming, and species loss. From the "trans," the poet attempts to reclaim the forces of universal genesis and heal the destruction wrought since then. My third chapter argues that Cha's *Dictee* imagines the possibility of the material, tactile word as a means of concretizing history and exchanging the seeds of anti-colonial resistance from one body to another.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Julie Phillips Brown was born in Philadelphia, where she later earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in Fine Arts, Visual Studies, and English Literature at the University of Pennsylvania. Trained as a painter, poet, and graphic designer, she earned joint MFA and PhD degrees in Creative Writing and English Literature at Cornell University. Her research interests include modern and contemporary poetry, poetics, and literature of the Americas; cross-genre, multi-ethnic, and transnational approaches to literature; feminist and gender studies; and the relation of visual art and digital technology to literature. During her time at Cornell, Brown's essays and poems have appeared in issues of *Contemporary Women's Writing*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Webconjunctions*, *Kblog* (Kelsey Street Press), and *delirious hem*. She lives in Walla Walla, Washington with her fiancé David.

For my mother, Linda Phillips Brown

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In recent years, and in the many years preceding the writing of this dissertation, I have been the very fortunate recipient of much time and attention, for which I can offer only humble thanks. I am enormously grateful to my committee chair Roger Gilbert, who provided the careful questions and steadfast, even-keeled support to steer my project aright; to Shirley Samuels for her razor-sharp wit, her savvy, and her keen, perceptive reading of my work; and to Rayna Kalas, for all the times her questions sent my work in a new direction and enriched it, and for her enthusiasm, practicality, and inimitable wry humor.

I thank Susan Stewart for her knowledge, compassion, and generosity in direction my early writing on Wallace Stevens, and for guiding me toward graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania and Cornell University. Many, many thanks are due to Julie Schneider, for her advocacy of my visual art, and for her continued support well beyond my years as her student. To Greg Djanikian, I will be forever grateful not only for his humor and warmth, but for his suggestion that in fact, I might just be a poet.

I wish to offer my heartfelt thanks to Susan Howe for her generosity in opening her home and studio to me during our conversations, and for taking the time to relive the writing of *The Midnight* with me. To Cecilia Vicuña, I owe the deepest thanks as a student, colleague, and friend. Our continuing collaboration on her *Kon Kon* and artist websites has been an invigorating artistic challenge and an absolute pleasure. I wish to thank in particular Susan Friedman and the other editors and readers at *Contemporary Women's Writing*, as well as Stephanie Sacharov and Beth Schewe, for their help in

brining my writing on *cloud-net* to its present form and publication. I am grateful to the Society for the Humanities at Cornell University, which made possible all of my conversations with Howe, Vicuña, and others, through the generous support of a Graduate Research Travel Grant.

To my father, brother, mother, and David, an overabundance of love. Thank you for believing in me, keeping me laughing, and lighting the way.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Biographical Sketch	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Table of Contents	vii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
Chapter Two: The Material Theater of Elegy in Susan Howe's <i>The Midnight</i>	20
Chapter Three: 'touch in transit': Manifestation / Manifestación in Cecilia Vicuña's <i>cloud-net</i>	57
Chapter Four: Mouth to Mouth: Bare Utterance in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's <i>Dictee</i>	93
Chapter Five: Coda	122
Appendix A: On <i>The Midnight</i> : A Conversation with Susan Howe	131
Appendix B: On <i>cloud-net</i> : A Conversation with Cecilia Vicuña	181
Works Cited	205

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### Poetry and the Visual Word

*Tactual Poïesis* bears witness to a contemporary field of poetic practice that continues to become startlingly diverse and increasingly defined by its permeable borders with other intellectual disciplines. A variety of poetic schools (though perhaps they are better thought of as modes of writing rather than movements or institutions with fixed aesthetics) now populate the field of contemporary poetry, from Neo-Formalism to Language and post-Language, and at the intersections between poetry and other disciplines, old practices continue to evolve and new practices emerge, including ecopoetics, ethnopoeitics, haptic poetries, and digital poetries. In contrast with this astonishing proliferation of poetic hybrids, the relationships between poetry and music, and between poetry and the visual arts, are nearly as old as poetic craft itself.

Poetry and painting in particular, which have sometimes been called the sister arts<sup>1</sup>, have supplied the primary model for understanding the dialogue between the verbal and visual arts. As a result, critical studies of literature and the arts continue to emphasize visual comparisons between the two-dimensional spaces of the page and the canvas, often to the exclusion of

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean Hagstrum notes in *The Sister Arts* that the relationship between the two arts is established as early as *The Republic*, the *Poetics*, and *Ars Poetica*, each of which lend credence to a special sisterhood between painting and poetry.

other senses, dimensions, and media. The motivations for an analogy between poetry and painting seem apparent enough: on a fundamental level, both poetry and painting make marks on two-dimensional surfaces in order to describe abstract concepts or concrete objects from the three-dimensional world. Whether this mark is alphabetic, pictographic, or pictorial, and whether it is made on the page or the canvas, appears to matter little in terms of its symbolic function: alphabetic, pictographic, and pictorial marks are more commonly considered with regard to the concepts and objects they represent within a symbolic system, rather than as actual objects, material and meaningful in and of themselves.

Within poetic practice the predominance of terms like “image” and “imagery” suggests the extent to which poetry relies upon visually-inflected models of thinking and composition. “Imagery,” now a commonplace turn of phrase in poetry workshops (following the term’s development through Imagism and later, the Deep Image school), encompasses verbal evocations of all, and not merely visual, sensory data. While the monopoly of the visual in poetry is by no means total, its emphasis has come at the expense of the other senses, and tactility in particular. In his *ABC of Reading* (1934), Pound famously postulated three means by which a poet might “charge words with meaning”: phanopoeia, melopoeia, and logopoeia. Pound draws a restrictive circle around poetic expression, limiting its possibilities for meaning to image, sound, and the interplay of words and the intellect. His account of language remains fixed within the context of a symbolic system: either written language consists “of signs... representing various noises,” or else it is “the other kind of language” that “starts by being a picture of the cat, or of something moving, or being, or of a group of things which occur under certain

circumstances...” (28-9). Whether alphabetic or pictographic, language understood in these terms depends upon not only an immaterial, bodiless signifier, but also an inherent incommensurability between signifier and signified—the word cannot be of the thing itself, just as assuredly as it cannot be a thing unto itself.

### **Away from the Canvas, Away from the Page**

At the same time that Pound was elaborating this familiar account of language, several important developments for the history of the material word were under way or on the horizon in literature and the visual arts. In 1912, F.T. Marinetti published his foundational Futurist text, “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature,” in which he called for a new poetics that would be better suited to the mechanical and technological advancements of the modern world. Among the key identifiers of this new poetics is Marinetti’s concept of “words-in-freedom,” a mode of writing centered on collapsed, concentrated words loosed from the strictures of syntax. The writer of words-in-freedom is also conspicuously defined by an expansion of the senses:

He will begin by brutally destroying syntax as he talks.... He won’t give a damn about punctuation and finding adjectives. He will ignore linguistic subtleties and nuances, and in his haste he will breathlessly fling his visual, auditory, and olfactory impressions at our nerve ends, precisely as they strike him. The vehemence of his emotional steam will burst the conduits of the sentence, the valves of punctuation, and the adjustable bolts of

adjectivization. Handfuls of essential words in no conventional acceptable order. The sole purpose of the narrator is to convey all the vibrations of his being...

...he will hurl huge networks of analogies at the world. He will thus convey life's analogical bedrock telegraphically, that is, with the same economical rapidity that the telegraph imposes on reporters and war correspondents in their summary reports.

(123)

As language follows Marinetti's call away from syntax and narrative (or "conventional acceptable order"), words drift from their semantic moorings in order to move more freely toward a sense impressionism that is not strictly mimetic. Although Marinetti names only the visual, auditory, and olfactory senses, it seems certain that the omission of tactility from his list is only a coincidental oversight rather than a deliberate exclusion<sup>2</sup>. While it is clear that language in many of Marinetti's own works is never entirely freed of syntactic, semantic, and mimetic constraints, works like *Zang Tumb Tumb*, the quintessential example of "words-in-freedom," demonstrate the characteristic variations in orthography and typography that Marinetti combines in order to create, rather than merely describe, a multi-sensory experience for the reader or viewer.

---

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, less than a decade later, Marinetti published his lesser-known "Tactilism: A Futurist Manifesto," in which he argued that one must educate oneself in the art and sense of touch in hopes of establishing a sincerity of exchange between one person and another: "I have realized that human beings speak to one another with the mouths and their eyes, but that they never quite manage to be totally sincere, because of the insensibility of the skin, which is ever a poor conductor of thoughts.... From this it follows that we need to transform the handshake, the kiss, the coupling into a continuous communication of thoughts" (372).

Guillaume Apollinaire's influential essay, "The New Spirit and the Poets" (1917) followed swiftly on the heels of Marinetti's Futurist movement and described the new Futurist approach to poetry as one that could rival the sensory appeal of photography and film through a massive "orchestra" of the senses:

It would have been strange if in an epoch when the popular art *par excellence*, the cinema, is a book of pictures, the poets had not tried to compose pictures for meditative and refined minds which are not content with the crude imaginings of the makers of films....

One should not be astonished if, with only the means they have now at their disposal, they set themselves to preparing this new art (vaster than the plain art of words) in which, like the conductors of an orchestra of unbelievable scope, they will have at their disposition the entire world, its noises and its appearances, the thought and the language of man, song, dance, all the arts and all the artifices... with which to compose the visible and unfolded book of the future. (228)

Relative to Marinetti's account of words-in-freedom, the poetic practice that Apollinaire describes—"vaster than the plain art of words," an "orchestra of unbelievable scope"—is so varied in its explosion of the senses and so rich in its inclusion of "song, dance, all the arts and all the artifices" that it seems a world entire unto itself. What Apollinaire envisions is a poetic realm fully formed from the matter of the world itself, so that the fields of the imagination and of the actual world might run together in a single continuous reality. It is ultimately the continuity between the imagined and the real that makes

possible a poetic rewriting of the world, and according to Apollinaire's argument, Futurists and their aesthetic heirs will be the poets to "compose" rather than merely adorn the world with their poems.

Over the several decades following Marinetti's original call for "words-in-freedom" in literature, significant changes in the 1940s New York art scene among the Abstract Expressionists began to reformulate the contemporary understanding of what painting was. Influential critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg began to distinguish the broad canvases and wide fields of color typical of Abstract Expressionists like Newman, Rothko, and Pollock from the smaller, figural, and otherwise representational works of their "easel painting" predecessors.

In his essay "The American Action Painters" (1952), Harold Rosenberg offered an account of Abstract Expressionism that did away with the mimetic function of painting entirely. Rather than a surface "through" which a scene could be visualized, painting was now to be understood as an event or happening, and the image upon the canvas was to be no more than the trace or afterimage of the event or action:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter. (25)

In this passage it becomes clear that in the pictorial sense, the manipulation of the image on the canvas has become secondary, while the tactile dimensions of painting have come to the fore. Paint and canvas are translated into equivalent “materials,” one “material in... hand” poised to impact and transform the other material, ultimately rendering the canvas not an illusionistic ground, but rather like a vestigial documentation of a time-limited action. Meanwhile Clement Greenberg argued in “American-Type Painting” that as the Abstract Expressionists increasingly resisted representational subjects, they invented of necessity an expanded field for the image and a change in its directionality: “the abstract expressionists were compelled to do huge canvases by the fact that they had increasingly renounced an illusion of depth within which they could develop pictorial incident without crowding; the flattening surfaces of their canvases compelled them to move along the picture plane laterally and seek in its sheer physical size the space necessary for the telling of their kind of pictorial story” (226). Although avowedly more formalist in his thinking than Rosenberg, Greenberg’s argument testifies to the fact that the Abstract Expressionists had begun to break away from the constraints of the smaller easel format, and to force the image to take place laterally in an ever expanding and extending claim on three-dimensional space.

Like Apollinaire, Rosenberg suggests a continuity between the spatial and temporal dimensions of the painter’s inhabited world with the materials and space of the canvas upon which he acts:

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a “moment” in the adulterated mixture of his life—whether “moment” means the actual minutes



taken up with spotting the canvas or the entire duration of a lucid drama conducted in sign language. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life. (27)

What Rosenberg implicitly recognizes in this formulation is the seed of many of the art forms that would develop throughout the 1960s and 70s, from events and happenings and the Fluxus group to body and performance art. In postulating the complete permeability of art and life, Rosenberg points to a new regime of painting that depends primarily upon performance and presentation, rather than pictorial illusion and representation.

The final critical stage in the anti-mimetic transformation of mid-century American painting came with Leo Steinberg's elaboration of the "flatbed" picture plane in "Other Criteria," a concept which some have considered painting's death-knell:

We can still hang their pictures—just as we tack up maps and architectural plans, or nail a horseshoe to the wall for good luck. Yet these pictures no longer simulate vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals. They no more depend on a head-to-toe correspondence with human posture than a newspaper does. The flatbed picture plane makes its symbolic allusions to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards—any receptor surface on which objects are scattered, on which data is entered, on which information may be received, printed, or pressed—whether coherently or in confusion. The pictures of the last fifteen to twenty years insist

on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operation processes. (84)

What Steinberg actually describes, wittingly or not, is the process of the new American painting's becoming sculptural. As painting shifts its orientation away from the vertical surface of the gallery wall, and away from the dimensions of the human body and illusions of depth, its objects and materials accrete and extend from the foundation of the canvas into space, almost as though the canvas were a sculptural pedestal.

In the decades immediately following painting's drift from the limits of the canvas and the support of the gallery wall, sculpture also began break free of its foundations and emerge from the gallery's interior. Rosalind Krauss' landmark essay in the 1979 issue of *October* coined a critical phrase for describing this new development: "sculpture in the expanded field." Krauss argued that mid-century Modernist sculpture had devolved into such a state of aesthetic autonomy that it had become an art negatively defined: sculpture was whatever was in the gallery but not the gallery, or else it was whatever was outside, and yet not landscape, and not architecture. In Krauss' formulation, "sculpture" as a self-contained category of art failed to account for the emergent three-dimensional forms of the late 1960s and early 1970s (e.g. installation and land art), which had begun to exploit material continuities between sculptural objects and their various environments. These newly minted sectors of exploration, Krauss notes, were not "defined in relation to a given medium—sculpture—but rather in relation to the logical operations on a set of cultural terms, for which any medium—photography, books, lines on walls, mirrors, or sculpture itself—might be used" (42).

Provocatively enough, Krauss has included in her list of objects the book. To borrow Krauss's term, then, we have now conclusively arrived in an age of poetry, and of the book, in the expanded field. If poetry and painting are still to be the sister arts, one must acknowledge that both key terms of this sisterhood have developed in significantly new directions over the last century. Within the circles of their respective avant-gardes, both poetry and painting drifted away from their representational vocabularies, as poets and painters increasingly interrogated the possibility of words and images not as signifiers, but as material things in and of themselves. The works considered in *Tactual Poïesis* each seek, through their own idiosyncratic inventions in form, not merely to represent or describe in words, but to make: to make their words material, felt objects, and in doing so, to convene those symphonies of multiple media and modes of writing first imagined by Marinetti and Apollinaire, and to rewrite the unfolded book of the past, present, and future.

### **Tactual Poïesis**

*Tactual Poïesis* develops an expanded vocabulary for how to read literature and the arts through attention to tactile, multi-dimensional innovations in the poetry of Susan Howe, Cecilia Vicuña, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

Following the innovations in form by earlier avant-garde groups in literature and the arts, ordinary textual conditions no longer satisfy—in the age of the book in the expanded field, the poem must be seen, heard, and felt. At the heart of each poet's formal innovation is the potential for tactual poïesis: a rewriting of history and a reordering of the contemporary world through

poetic and readerly processes that are, literally, hands-on. I argue that it is precisely a poem's tactility that makes its text, and the histories contained therein, actual, present, and physical—and therefore, too, subject to direct revision by both poet and reader. The histories these poets revise are numerous and far-ranging: from personal, familial narratives in Howe's *The Midnight* and Cha's *Dictée*, to cultural and national memories in *Dictée* and Vicuña's *cloud-net*, to linguistic and literary conventions in all three works together.

Susan Howe's *The Midnight* is a book of collage, juxtaposing verse, prose, personal narrative, found text sources, family photographs, and images of lace. In fashioning *The Midnight*, the poet cuts, culls, touches, and juxtaposes disparate objects, media, discourses, and genres. Her textual and visual weaving of familial and literary sources—which Howe has called “cutwork”—serves as a tactual, ritual performance. What results is an elaborate “lacework”: a book rife with friction between passages of continuity and order, and passages of disjunction and lacunae. For Howe, tactile contact with and within the text becomes sacred ritual. The frictions between materials within the text's own lacework, and between the text's lacework and the body of the writer or reader, open onto a liminal, theatrical space that Howe names “the relational space.” In the relational space, boundaries dissolve between the past and the present, and the dead and the living, as literary and familiar ghosts alike emerge within its shade.

Written in the years after the passing of Howe's mother, *The Midnight* takes seriously the possibility that an elegy might not merely mourn the dead, but in fact call, perform, and resurrect the dead from traces left in textual material. This vision of the elegy is particular to Howe who, rather than

availing herself of the normally private elegy, makes an elegy that is not only public and theatrical, but collaborative as well. Ultimately the work of mourning in *The Midnight* depends not only on the writer's collage, but also on the reader's performance of her own lacework. The movement of the writer's and reader's hands through the book's pages is a manual animation that transforms the book into a costumed extension of their bodies. To wear the poem in this way, to animate its text from within, is to activate that theatrical, relational space in which the dead can return—to literally supply the flesh and blood to its pages. Thus the otherwise private elegy becomes a shared, physical exchange between author, poem, ghost, and reader. This uncanny, tactile collaboration ultimately draws new and renewed connections between Howe, her familial and aesthetic lineages, and her reader, gathering a company of specters to keep vigil with the poet in her mourning.

Cecilia Vicuña's book and art installation *cloud-net* relies on bodily contact between poet, audience participants, and the material of the poem in order to open what Vicuña has called the "trans": a transitive space between the present and an earlier time prior to the threats of globalization, global warming, and species loss. *cloud-net* is a multi-site, multi-media project that takes place in the gallery, on the street, and in the book. The book's lines of verse are typeset in string-like arrangements, such that Vicuña connects the poetic line on the page with the large-scale installations of white woolen skeins in the gallery. This connection of page and three-dimensional space forms a textual and material web, or cloud-basket. What the basket interweaves and embodies is far-reaching: languages (particularly English, Spanish, and Quechua), feminine and domestic craft, history and fate, the World Wide Web, social networks, globalization, memory and a mindfulness

for the present. The sheer multiplicity of associations is staggering, but deliberately so: the poet's method of resistance must match the complexity of the problem to which she addresses herself.

Vicuña's lines, and her merging of verse, lyric, song, dance, sculpture, performance, and installation, come in response to a world in extremis—in extremis, as the book gradually reveals, due to the effects of colonialism, globalization, gender inequity, and ecological deterioration. Participants in the work must continually translate between different forms and discourses, using the full extent of their senses and embodiments. As Vicuña and participants touch and move their bodies among *cloud-net*'s webs, they perform a tactual poïesis, opening the “trans”: that portal between the present and the pre-emergent world. For Vicuña, it is only from this interstitial position that the poet can reclaim the original energy of universal genesis and heal the destruction wrought since then. Although each attempt at return fails, each failure is a productive decay, and the loam from which a renewed attempt can grow.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's multi-genre book *Dictee* develops a cross-cultural and re-gendered translation of traditional epic form through the tactile and visual eruptions in its pages. While the text retains certain identifiers of the epic genre, its appeals to the muses, heroic feats, and narratives of nation building are conspicuously distorted. *Dictee* ultimately forges a hybrid with other forms and discourses—not only lyric, but also autobiography, documentary, translation exercises, epistolary, visual arts, and film. What results is a highly tactile and visual text, in which the matter of language itself is palpable. *Dictee* dwells in particular on the body as the site in which these multiple forms and discourses must be translated. For Cha, a female speaker

in the epic must produce language through tactile, bodily, and gendered means. While the speaker's language derives initially from external sources—the language of others enters, touches, and transforms her body—a reversal then follows. The foreign words of others are processed as physical material by her body until a tempered hybrid voice emerges. Only through these words that are “barer than flesh” and “stronger than bone” can the speaker manage her first, minute utterance and make room in other languages—and in the epic—for her voice and the voices of other marginalized women, both historical and familial, from female revolutionaries like Joan of Arc and Yu Guan Soon to the author's own mother, Hyun Soon Huo.

*The Midnight*, *cloud-net*, and *Dictée* each operate in an expanded field of linguistic, formal, and sensory possibilities, where language is manipulated not only as text, but as physical matter. As their poems materialize in two- and three-dimensional spaces, and make themselves available not only through vision, but through touch and the other senses, Howe, Vicuña, and Cha also manifest their personal, political, and spiritual revisions to the world as such. Their texts propose and begin to make tangible alternative economies of language, gender, race, and culture, not only for themselves, but also for readers. Together writer and reader collaborate in a reciprocal, tactual poïesis. Together they grasp the beginnings of poetry's potential to do, to make, and remake—to manifest vision in the contemporary moment.

## Touch in the In-Between

The term “tactual poïesis” attempts to name the process by which a transformative, interstitial space between history and the present is brought into being by tactile and visual innovations in poetic form. For Susan Howe, Cecilia Vicuña, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, only the tactile sense—in conjunction with the visual and aural dimensions of poetry—can resurrect those people and narratives lost to the margins of history, and transform the historical record into a present, tangible, and rewritable document. All three poets understand the interstitial space of the in-between as a kind of magical medium. Working from within the in-between, each writer extends her poetic text beyond the aesthetic and physical limits of the book, such that the vision described in its pages begins to take on a material reality of its own—a reality continuous with the bodies of the reader and writer, as well as the world at large. What each poet touches in the in-between is a creative force, an unrealized poïetic potential, through which unsatisfactory conditions in the actual world can be redressed.

For Howe, the “relational space” is the ghostly interleaf, the curtain on the stage between the living and the dead, and the thinnest tissue where those loved but lost can return, including Howe’s mother. For Vicuña, the “trans” of *cloud-net* offers to the return the poet and the earth to a time closer to the origins of the universe, a time before the present era of ecological crisis and late Capitalist empire. In *Dictée*, the “Tertium Quid,” the space that is not one thing nor the other, lies within the body of the speaker herself, Diseuse. Her body is the generator, and her mouth the gateway, between an ontological world and the voices of the other women she carries and



reproduces within her. Each text considered in this study depends upon, indeed demands, that the reader engage with its language on its own tactile terms. Each poet understands that ultimately, the composing of “the unfolded book of the future” takes place, and can only take place, through the bodies, the hands, and the mouths of others.

In her essay “On the Art of the Future,” Susan Stewart argues that both aesthetics and ethics center on visual performance and exchange—what she refers to as “face-to-face” forms of engagement—whether between the artwork and its observer in aesthetics, or between beholder and beheld in ethics. The model of face-to-face engagement is construed as ethical because “purposeless” and “non-teleological,” turning instead on “a project of implicit mutuality and heightened responsiveness or intensity” between the two figures (18). Thus when one encounters art that is “in itself and for itself,” one encounters openly the unexpected, the unaccountable, the uncanny. So too, Stewart argues, with the Other. Ethical exchange can be learned through looking at art, she argues, since “face-to-face forms have a capacity to change or move us, perhaps because of their propinquity and because of the incipient tactility such close conditions imply” (18). Stewart seems to recognize that an artwork’s “capacity to change or move” a viewer is in fact grounded in proximity and the sense of touch; nevertheless, her account of ethical exchange still privileges vision as the primary sense and the face as the primary site through which ethical exchange takes place. In their works Howe, Vicuña, and Cha acknowledge the power of proximity and tactility, and in their shift toward a more equitable account of history and a more ethical model of intersubjective relation, they refocus on touch and the body as the

primary sense and site of reciprocal exchange between the artwork and the “viewer,” the text and the “reader,” and history and the present.

Both vision and hearing create their sensory representations from reflections of the ontological world, whether through light or sound waves, and both senses are concentrated in a single organ of the body, whereas touch does not reflect an external world. Rather, touch grasps an object, grafts one material onto another, and holds firmly, directly. The sense of touch also saturates the entire body, with sensory receptors dispersed across the entirety of the skin, as well as the muscles, bones, and organs of the body, such that there is no exclusive perspective through which the body experiences tactile stimuli. Thus to touch words—to mark them on a surface, to hold them in hand, or to reproduce their reverberations throughout the lungs, throat, mouth, and nose in speech, is to experience language with the entire body, to feel the body moved, touched, formed, and delimited by language, literally, just as equally as the writing or speaking body forms the text or utterance.

At its most effective moments of realization, tactual poïesis takes full advantage of the reciprocity that inheres in touch in order to materialize and transfer language between two or more people, and to form a mutual transcription between the body of the reader or writer and the world at large. While one may look without being seen looking, touch is defined by its reciprocity: the moment we move to touch, we also surrender ourselves to being touched in return, as in this excerpt from Cecilia Vicuña’s book-length poem *Quipoem*:

the sole  
touched

the ground

the ground

touched

the foot

the foot's

knowledge

was born

in the meeting

of the sole's lines

and the earth's

cracks

(17)

These lines stress the sensory knowledge of the whole body, and indicate its importance for how the body comes into presence—comes into self-knowledge—through the act of touching. It is not merely the case that the foot imprints upon the ground. Without its contact with the ground, a foot could not know how to be a foot, and it is this mutual transcription of body and earth that assures the presence of both. Stewart notes that because both artworks and bodies are subject to decay, the ability to translate and transfer the material of an artwork from one body to another is critical for ensuring its survival:

...artworks can make nonbeing present and so open up the sphere of being to what is not [...] Artworks and persons inhabit a materiality vulnerable to decay and dissolution. They require

acts of physical care as well as acts of disinterested engagement in order to continue, and they are finite nonetheless. They literally bear meaning, and once they are materially gone, they exist only if they are carried on in the paralife of reproduction and other forms of description... (24)

Thus the ability to rewrite history and to reorder the contemporary world depends upon the artist's ability to make her vision materially present and tangible, but also, quite critically, upon the body-to-body exchange in which the work continues on in a paralife through the bodies, memories, utterances, and actions of others.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE MATERIAL THEATER OF ELEGY IN SUSAN HOWE'S *THE MIDNIGHT*

*The Midnight*, Susan Howe's complex elegy in image, prose, and verse, is a dense, fibrous constellation of materials and ideas. Although ordered in codex form, the content of *The Midnight* is composed according to a collage process—for both reader and writer alike, materials and ideas are made to touch and rub against one another in the single field of the book, giving rise to what Howe provocatively names “the relational space.” The intricate interlacing of textual and visual materials in *The Midnight* calls for a proportionately constellated critical response, one that need not proceed directly by line or by logic. One is tempted to say everything of *The Midnight* at once, in a cacophonous constellation of one's own, or say nothing. *The Midnight* offers so many loose threads to take up, so many ways of beginning—what follows here is one particular path through Howe's wilderness of words. At every turn, other paths run parallel or trail off among the brush, trees, and darkness.

Perhaps in such a complex landscape, it's best to begin with a survey of the terrain, to start out by looking, rather than by reading. The surface of *The Midnight* dazzles: a casual glance through the New Directions paperback edition reveals an assemblage of pages patterned with unconventional typographies and provocative visual artifacts. The front and back covers are pitch black, except for a minimum of white text and two grayscale images. The interior of the book contains several pages of front matter, followed by

five alternating sections of verse and prose. Each of the verse and prose sections offers multiple, nested layers of textual and visual materials. Even this scant survey of *The Midnight*'s surfaces begins to reveal some of Howe's most prominent themes: citation, collage, weaving, and lacing; the materiality and performativity of the text; and double visions, reversals of meaning, two-way truths, and the interplay between apparent opposites like dark and light, verse and prose, text and image.

Howe's aesthetics of collage is visibly at work in the prose sections "Scare Quotes I" and "Scare Quotes II," which interweave short, titled prose passages, quotations from literary and other textual sources, and various photographs. The photographs almost always capture other "two-dimensional" materials, including book covers, interleaves, illustrations, C.S. Peirce's diagrams in manuscript, postage, maps, paintings, Howe's family photographs, and several well-worn paper bookmarks once belonging to the poet's mother. The surface arrangement of these materials suggests the intimacy of a scrapbook or diary, and Howe interlaces her own passages of essay-like prose and personal anecdote with her found materials, drawing narrative connections between her own life and the lives dwelling in the source materials she has at hand.

Howe's narratives seldom continue directly from one titled prose passage to the next, but they do resurface throughout the book, however unpredictably. To illustrate the disjunctive movement of the prose sections, I have indexed the titles and corresponding themes from just ten pages from "Scare Quotes I": "Bailey I": dictionary definitions of "bed," "closet," "curtain," and "hangings"; "Cutwork": embroidery, lace, and Michael Drayton's *The Muses Elizium*; "Traffic Control": the history of the production

of bedhangings; “Darn”: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “The Poet”; “Curtain”: table comparing the English, Saxon, Greek, and Hebrew alphabets; “Dark Daylight of Words”: Frederick Law Olmsted’s childhood and park design; “hwist”: C.S. Peirce’s definition of Nominalism, games of whist with his father; “Mrs. Bury Palliser”: definition of “cordonnet”; “Motley”: Micheal Mac Liammoir’s description of Mary Manning; “Old Sherry”: Thomas Sheridan’s definitions of “curtain” and “hanging” (*The Midnight* 44-54). Even in this linear distillation of a single scrap from Howe’s textual collage, the range of subject matter can be dizzying. The poet’s favorite subjects do return, but according to their own logic and in their own time. Before the text can move between the Bailey and Sheridan dictionaries, everything from historical and technical descriptions of textiles to literary works to the poet’s reflections on C.S. Peirce’s insomnia must be traversed. Each of these subjects, of course, diverges on ponderous, exploded paths of its own, each to be woven, unwoven, and woven anew throughout the remainder of the book.

The presence of Howe’s collage process is also felt in the sections of verse, though it is less visually pronounced than in the prose sections. Compared with their prose counterparts, “Bed Hangings I,” “Bed Hangings II,” and “Kidnapped” contain little visual imagery, except in their opening and concluding pages. Prose in the proper sense is almost entirely absent, though Howe’s verse regularly samples and lineates texts from a variety of prose sources. These excerpts entwine with the poet’s own language to form terse poetic texts. Each text is centered on both the horizontal and vertical axes of the page, and most are comprised of a single left-justified stanza. The right rags of the stanzas are so even that most of the poetic texts appear as near-perfect rectangles. The abundant white space of the page and the self-

enclosed rectangular form of the poetic texts create a conspicuous tension between figure and ground. At times the unwritten space of the margins seems so much more than ground; indeed, the typographical arrangement gives the paradoxical impression of two juxtaposed, equally “positive” spaces, rather than the more familiar situation, in which a negative ground recedes behind a positive figure. At other times, the poetic texts themselves appear fugitive; though they bear a surface resemblance to short lyrics, they do not function fully as self-sufficient poems. Often their content fails to make a coherent whole, and they are almost exclusively without title or semantic closure. Only occasionally do they form a larger linked series: one fragment of text seldom follows from or leads to preceding or subsequent texts. The verse sections of *The Midnight* regularly dash any expectations the reader may have for closure or continuity of narrative, and what remains is a collection of incomplete fragments. The poem, if it is to be found here at all, surfaces from the wilderness of words as a fugitive weaving of ghosts and gestures. Each reader must carve out her own path and her own midnight from Howe’s heap of broken images.

### ***“Dark Daylight of Words”***

Among *The Midnight*’s astonishing variety of textual source materials, citations of archaic dictionary definitions feature prominently. Howe carefully selects and assembles glosses for certain key words like “awake,” “bed,” “closet,” “curtain,” and “hangings,” so that these otherwise mundane words take on a peculiar resonance in their proximity to one another. On their



surfaces, of course, the words evoke the domestic, nocturnal sphere of the bedchamber. The visual presentation of each word has been typeset according to the typographical conventions for dictionary entries. Such attention has been paid to the physical instantiation of each word on the page, that one begins to feel that its very letters have been weighed and caressed by the poet, as though they were the very stuff of the thing itself, or more.

One word, however, remains conspicuous for its omission in Howe's text. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, then, we find:

- A. n. 1. a. The middle of the night; spec. (now the usual sense) 12 o'clock at night. b. An instance or occurrence of midnight.
- 2. Intense darkness or gloom; a period of intense darkness.
- 3. fig. The crucial hour, the moment when something reaches a crisis or comes to an end. ("Midnight")

As the first definition in this entry suggests, "midnight" most commonly serves in the literal sense, as a temporal marker designating the midpoint in the passage of night. "Midnight" also indicates the moment of transition between the close of one day and the dawn of another. In the latter case, "midnight" must be defined negatively: it is a moment that occurs precisely between one day and another, and thus belongs to neither. Read more figuratively, "midnight" also suggests the dead of the night, when we experience the world as its darkest and most vacant. It is a moment of "intense darkness or gloom," and one that we often encounter alone. The third usage, still more figurative, descends naturally enough from the preceding definitions: as a time of transition, darkness, and gloom, the

midnight seems the moment most apt to precipitate a critical point, crisis, or end. At least in Howe's midnight, the temporal liminality of that hour and the depth of its darkness are precisely the conditions for the elegist's feverish work.

Nocturne or nightscape, *The Midnight* takes place under cover—of curtain, of closet, of language, of unlit obscurity. Darkling, the poet listens and writes, keeps vigil with memory and history. As she embroiders dark pastoral and elegy, the scene of her writing is decidedly domestic, interior, and nocturnal: "I am an insomniac who goes to bed in a closet" (*The Midnight* 43). This scant admission at the outset of "Scare Quotes I" evokes an odd image of the sleep-deprived poet cramped and closeted among hanging clothes and scattered shoes. But Howe's closet is no modern closet—hers is far stranger still, as these cited entries for "bed," "closet," "curtain," and "hangings" suggest:

*Bailey I*

BED, to lie or rest on. BED of Snakes, a Knot of young ones. To BED, to pray. Spenc. BED [in Gunnery] is a thick Plank which lies under a Piece of Ordnance on the Carriage. To BED with one, is to lie together in the same Bed; most usually spoken of new married Persons on the first Night. To BED [Hunting Term] a Roe is said to bed, when she lodges in a particular Place. CLOSET [of Close] a small Apartment in a Room. CLOSET [in Heraldry] is the Half of the Bar; the Bar ought to contain the fifth part of the Escutcheon. CURTAIN, a Hanging about a Bed, a Window, &c. CURTAIN [in Fortification] is the Front of a

Wall or fortified Place, between two Bastions.

HANGINGS, Linings or Curtains for Rooms, of Arras,

Tapestry, &c. (*The Midnight* 44)

Howe's layering of dictionary definitions in this passage reveals narrative undercurrents between "bed," "closet," "curtain," and "hangings." Apart from their more familiar usages having to do with the furnishings and appointments in a bedchamber, these words also belong to military vocabulary. A second narrative emerges, suggesting an assault—"gunnery" and "ordinance" run up against terms of resistance like "escutcheon" and the "Front of a Wall or fortified Place." In more specialized circumstances "closet" also refers to a particular form in heraldic signage. Thus Howe's earlier admission that she goes to bed in a closet involves much more than mere rest—she is awake and embattled in the dead of night. To go to bed as she does is also to pray, to have sex, to reproduce, and to die (as another dictionary entry reveals some pages later). Somewhere between the warp and weft of these terms lie several of *The Midnight's* larger thematic concerns: reproduction, genealogy, death, mourning, and prayer.

The front matter of "Scare Quotes I" consists of three epigraphs, of sorts: an image featuring spliced illustrations from *At the Back of the North Wind* and *A Child's Garden of Verses*; a quotation from *Macbeth*; and a logical graph from C.S. Peirce's manuscripts. In *At the Back of the North Wind*, George MacDonald tells the story of a little boy, Diamond, who befriends the North Wind and accompanies her on a series of nocturnal adventures. They first meet when Diamond, cold from the wind blowing through the thin walls of his hayloft bedroom, plugs a hole where one knot in the wood has come loose. The North Wind blasts his plug of hay loose three

times, and finally it is Diamond's mother who patches the hole with paper the next day. The following night, the wind comes to visit Diamond again, and wakes him with the sound of a woman's faint, ghostly whisper:

But he was not frightened, for he had not yet learned how to be; so he sat up and hearkened. At last the voice, which, though quite gentle, sounded a little angry, appeared to come from the back of the bed. He crept nearer to it, and laid his ear against the wall. Then he heard nothing but the wind, which sounded very loud indeed. The moment, however, that he moved his head from the wall, he heard the voice again, close to his ear. He felt about with his hand, and came upon the piece of paper his mother had pasted over the hole. Against this he laid his ear, and then he heard the voice quite distinct. There was, in fact, a little corner of the paper loose, and through that, as from a mouth in the wall, the voice came.

"What do you mean, little boy—closing up my window?"

"What window?" asked Diamond. (12-13)

In this passage, MacDonald is careful to distinguish between the loud, unintelligible sound of "the wind," and the disembodied yet anthropomorphic voice of the North Wind. Curiously, the voice of the North Wind only becomes intelligible when she articulates her words through the mother's paper "fortification" to the wall—the paper is like a curtain or hanging, partially sealing off the North Wind's "window." And yet by papering over the hole, Diamond's mother creates a drum-like apparatus. As Diamond feels the

paper with his fingers and places his ear to its surface, it amplifies and focuses the voice of the North Wind. Thus it is the mother's paper that ultimately facilitates communication with the son. This passage is of particular interest for *The Midnight* because, as we will see, it provides one precedent for the ways in which Howe deploys collage for elegiac ends.

The image Howe reproduces from *At the Back of the North Wind* shows illustrator Frank Pape's depiction of the North Wind as she stands beside Diamond, surrounding him with the cloud of her hair. Diamond and the figure of a beautiful woman appear to embrace, as though an uncanny Madonna and child:

Leaning over him was the large beautiful pale face of a woman. Her dark eyes looked a little angry, for they had just begun to flash; but a quivering in her sweet lip made her look as if she were going to cry. What was most strange was that away from her head streamed out her black hair in every direction, so that the darkness in the hayloft looked as if it were made of her hair; but as Diamond gazed at her in speechless amazement, mingled with confidence—for the boy was entranced with her mighty beauty—her hair began to gather itself out of the darkness, and fell down all about her again, till her face looked out of the midst of it like a moon out of a cloud. (17)

Howe's figure of the insomniac poet, writing alone at night in her closet, has much in common with young Diamond, startled in his hayloft bedchamber. Here the North Wind appears as an intimidating womanly presence, at least

as terrible as she is beautiful: her eyes flash with anger, though her pale face appears placid, and her lip is “sweet.” Her hair roils with remarkable energy, so that the North Wind is like the night itself, and seems to emerge from the very depths of its darkness. Confronted with the formidable prospect of someone who is at once both embodied and atmospheric, Diamond stands appropriately amazed and utterly child-like.

Adjacent the reproduction of Pape’s illustration, Howe has opened Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses* to the poem “Shadow March.” Although the poem is only partially visible in the frame of the reproduction, enough text is shown so that the viewer can read the title and the better part of the first two stanzas. Any reader who is sufficiently curious will be able to find the original poem and read the lines in full:

All round the house is the jet-black night;  
It stares through the window-pane;  
It crawls in the corners, hiding from the light,  
And it moves with the moving flame.

Now my little heart goes a-beating like a drum,  
With the breath of Bogie in my hair,  
And all round the candle the crooked shadows come.  
And go marching along up the stair.

The shadow of the balusters, the shadow of the lamp,  
The shadow of the child that goes to bed—  
All the wicked shadows coming, tramp, tramp, tramp,  
With the black night overhead. (51)

In Stevenson's poem, the night takes on a decidedly sinister quality. Like the North Wind in MacDonald's story, the night penetrates the safety of the enclosed domestic space through a window and willfully seeks out the child. The darkness peers through the window-pane. It creeps and breathes a phantom's breath in locks of the young speaker's hair, and sets her heart racing with fear. By the final stanza, the first person speaker of the previous lines has shifted to third person, and the personal pronouns of the second stanza have been abandoned entirely. In effect, the child on her way to bed has disappeared from the poem. Her body has been engulfed by the darkness beyond the text, so that only the shadow she casts remains, as though she were finally only shadow herself. It seems little wonder that both child and poet should hurry themselves to bed. The darkness of night provides little reprieve for either.

In the lines Howe cites from *Macbeth*, we find that sleeping is no safer than waking: "Now o'er the one half-world / Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse / The curtain'd sleep:" The semi-colon at the end of Shakespeare's lines breaks off, as though in anticipation of the text to follow from Howe. Where darkness falls on one half of Shakespeare's globe, the scene is that of still life—*nature morte*—or at best, a half-life in a half-world. In spite of the fortification afforded by bed curtains, "wicked dreams"—like Stevenson's "wicked shadows," and MacDonald's North Wind—enter the unconscious and prey upon the dreamer. For the poet, the shadows of midnight and the waking nightmares it breeds reach her, despite being awake in bed and closeted by bed hangings. In her curtain'd waking, the insomniac grows feverish: awake when she should be asleep, preyed upon and abused

when she should be fast and safe, her persistence of consciousness is unnatural, and binds her to a half-world between dream and nightmare.

The disturbance that keeps the poet suspended in consciousness, in darkness, and in time rests subtly beneath the surface of the MacDonald and Stevenson excerpts (both from books belonging to Howe's mother, the Irish writer and actress Mary Manning), the lines from *Macbeth*, and the Peirce manuscript, which traces the relation between "mother" and "love."

Published in 2003, *The Midnight*, and its chapbook predecessors, *Bed Hangings*, *Bedhangings II*, and *Kidnapped*<sup>3</sup>, were written in the years after Manning's passing in 1999. It is her death and Howe's mourning that form the central crises that echo throughout *The Midnight*. The unconventional form of *The Midnight*, its collage of visual and tactile material, represents Howe's search for modes of reading and writing that are adequate to the task of her mourning. In her search, she revises elegiac tradition, so that her mourning takes place—and can only take place—in the liminal state created by collage and lacework. It is only in the touching of text and image, day and night, waking and sleeping, and the living and the dead that Howe can recover her mother, and herself.

---

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Martin argues that these earlier versions of the verse sections of *The Midnight* were "highly attuned to the visual, even tactile dimension of [Howe's] work" and offered "something different from the re-crafted, amalgamated final product" from New Directions. She notes in particular that in *Bed Hangings* (from Granary Press in 2001), the poems are set within illustrations by Susan Bee, while the deluxe version of *Kidnapped* from Coracle Press (2002) provided "not only a photo of the all-important interleaf from [John Manning's] *The Master of Ballantrae*, but a loose leaf of tissue itself so that we too can experience its 'Mist-like transience'" (760). Of course, these remarkable extensions of the text's tactility demonstrate the promise of the small press and the limitations of the larger publishing houses; still, attention to tactility survives in the final version of *The Midnight* through its collaged form, and through the hands of the poet and reader who read and write their way through it.



As both its literal and figurative senses show, “midnight” depends upon its liminal position between temporal states and between affective atmospheres. Thus far the night and the dark have appeared as menacing agents in Howe’s sources—in their various forms, they creep, threaten, and abuse the sleeping and the waking, the child and the adult, alike. But in compound form, “midnight” also belongs to midnight oil, midnight prayer, midnight matinee, and midnight watching. To burn the midnight oil is to continue on (writing, perhaps) well beyond the hours of waning daylight, and to engage in midnight watching is to remain awake, alert far into the night. The midnight matinee is a special theatrical performance, staged at that witching hour, while the devout encounter the divine at the stroke of twelve in midnight prayer. Each of these are kinds of nightwork, and serve in *The Midnight* not as sources of menace, but as forms of generation amidst the gloom of deepest night and mourning.

For Howe, the darkness of the midnight is a double-edged sword—or in the poet’s parlance, a “dialethism” or two-way truth. The darkness is at once the sorrow that attends the poet’s loss and the condition that lights the way toward a renewed connection with her mother. Under cover of darkness and enclosed within its curtains, Howe performs her own midnight watching and midnight prayer:

*To the Compiler of Memories*

Frequent exposure to night air  
An inattention to the necessity  
of changing damp clothes

Sweet affliction sweet affliction

Singing as I wade to heaven (*The Midnight* 20)

The lines in this fragment from “Bed Hangings I” are uncommonly lyric and personal relative to other passages of verse in *The Midnight*. On its surface, the fragment appears to recount a scene in which the itinerant minister Hope Atherton has disregarded his physical discomfort, so enraptured is he with enthusiasm for the divine. One scourges the body to purify the soul. But Atherton is clearly Howe’s doppelganger, too. The poet is the “Compiler of Memories” par excellence, and it is her body that has been so frequently exposed to night airs—awake in her grief, in her writing, and now it seems, in her vigil and prayers. How terrific her suffering—the affliction it gives is “sweet.” The line has the rhythm of a sung hymn. Sweet affliction, sweet affliction, it intones, as if the repeated incantation might open onto the very heaven the poem imagines. She wades toward heaven, toward her mother—but through what, and how?

A certain calm comes at the outset of “Bed Hangings I,” as the poet first encounters the nocturnal conditions of her writing as an illuminating darkness:

For here we are here

**B E D H A N G I N G S**

daylight does not reach

Vast depth on the wall

Neophyte (*The Midnight* 3)

Each of the first two lines insists on the immediacy of the text, and on the presence of the poet. The word “we” gathers reader and poet together, while “here” stages a locale for their meeting—we are *here*, we are located, in the

material fact of the word “here” on the white of the page. The physicality of the word “**B E D H A N G I N G S**” is made especially conspicuous by its typography: it has been set in bold, capital letters, with generous kerning between each of the characters. The letters are textured and heavy—they occupy so much space on the page, that with just eleven characters, “bedhangings” makes for the longest of all the lines in the passage. As such, the bed hangings displace and hold back the white space of the page: “daylight does not reach” beyond their curtained enclosures.

In the final line the poet hails herself, and perhaps the reader too, as a “Neophyte.” We are all novices at this early stage of the book, but “neophyte” also refers to one who has been newly awakened to religious faith. Following Howe’s admission of insomnia in “Scare Quotes I,” two dictionary definitions appear in swift succession: “‘AWAKE, *a.* Not sleeping; in a state of vigilance or action.’ ‘AWAKENING, *n.* A revival of religion, or more general attention to religion than usual.’” (*The Midnight* 43). Howe’s awakening takes place in the absence of light, behind closed bed curtains. Though the characters of “bedhangings” are heavy and drawn, some little space of white (if not light) of the page infiltrates their crevices, as though one might see through them just as easily as not (as a matter of practicality, of course, curtains may be opened or drawn at will). The very obscurity provided by the hangings seems to be, perhaps counter-intuitively, the condition for “seeing” in *The Midnight*, although the poet’s vision may really belong to another source of sensory perception altogether.

Just as the dark is the light by which the poet begins to see, so too is the curtain the veil that clarifies and connects one world with another. As in

MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*, it is paradoxically an obstructing material that facilitates contact:

Glide my shadow through  
time curtains will dwindle  
Far be it from me whatever  
reaction splits into willing  
things absolute but absent  
are not alone Nominalism  
While I lie in you for refuge  
it is sanctuary it is refuge (*The Midnight* 13)

Here in the dark, the form of the body and its limits are dissolved. What remains in the poem, as in "Shadow March," is only the trace of the poet's body. The darkness has sparked some transformation, in which the body becomes no more than spectral remnant, a mere curtain itself, and moves in, through, and across the curtains of time. The divisions between the present and other absent, absolute temporalities fall. As the poet inhabits that thin liminal curtain, the present opens onto the "relational space"—to the past, and to the dead.

### ***Opus Scissum, or "Open Sesame"***

Relational space in *The Midnight* is primarily generated by two forms of complementary cutwork: collage and lace. Both processes require visual, and especially tactile, interventions in the poetic text. While several critics have

eloquently characterized Howe's method of composition as "citational"<sup>4</sup>, this term does not adequately account for the ways in Howe's cutwork processes treat the source texts not just as signifiers, but as physical matter to be worked upon, in and of themselves. Because collage in literature is often thought of as an import from the visual arts, we sometimes fail to recognize that far from being a mere visual strategy, collage is also a plastic art: it requires the manipulation and juxtaposition of physical materials (after all, "collage" is from the French "coller," meaning "to glue" or "to stick"). Thus tactile connection is of the utmost importance for collage and other cutworks.

Preceding both the verse and prose sections in *The Midnight* is a brief, untitled section of front matter containing both visual imagery and text. The first image we encounter is a reproduction of the title page from a copy of *The Master of Ballantrae* once belonging to Howe's uncle, John Manning. On the verso of this page, we find the image of the title page in reverse, as though the paper of the New Directions edition were transparent (it is not—it is rather of an opaque, cream stock). If the viewer attempts to read the text of the title page, she will notice that the characters of the words are somewhat blurred, as if seen from a distance or reproduced with a faulty lens. The index of illustrations explains that this curious effect has been achieved by reproducing the title page as seen through its own tissue interleaf. Following this first curious artifact are two short prose passages. Like the double-sided reproductions from *Ballantrae*, these two passages appear to mirror one another, with the first prose passage occurring on the recto, and the second on the verso of a single page. For the convenience of comparison, I have

---

<sup>4</sup> Most notably in Gerald L. Bruns, "Voices of Construction: On Susan Howe's Poetry and Poetics (A Citational Ghost Story)"; Marjorie Perloff, "'The Rattle of Statistical Traffic': Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe's *The Midnight*"

placed them here side by side, with only the gutter to serve in place of the physical division of the page:

There was a time when  
bookbinders placed a tissue  
interleaf between frontispiece and  
title page in order to prevent  
illustration and text from rubbing  
together. Although a sign is  
understood to be consubstantial  
with the thing or being it  
represents, word and picture are  
essentially rivals. The transitional  
space between image and  
scripture is often a zone of  
contention. Here we must  
separate. Even printers and  
binders drift apart. Tissue paper  
for wrapping can also be used for  
tracing. Mist-like transience.  
Listen, quick rustling. If a piece of  
sentence left unfinished can act  
as witness to a question  
proposed by suspected ending  
the other side is what will happen.  
Stage snow. Pantomime.

“Give me a sheet.

The counterfeit  
presentment of two papers. After  
1914, advancements in printing  
technology rendered an interleaf  
obsolete. Mischief delights in  
playing with surfaces. Today each  
spectral scrap intact in a handed  
down book has acquired an  
enchanted aura quite apart from  
its original utilitarian function.  
Wonderfully life-like, approaching  
transparency, not shining: this  
pale or wanly yellow, tangible  
intangible murderously gentle  
exile, mutely begs to be excused.  
Superstition remains—as spiritual  
hyphen. Listen, quick rustling. In  
second character, freed from  
practical obligation, I’m not  
asleep just leafing. Miniature  
scenery. Etiquette.

On your side, with  
pleasure.”

*(The Midnight iii-iv)*

The prose on the recto provides for the uninitiated a brief explanation of earlier printing practices, but quickly moves from this history lesson toward a proposition that drives to the very heart of Howe's poetics. At one time, we are told, the tissue interleaf served, as any good curtain, to separate. From a practical standpoint, the separation between text and image, frontispiece and title page, was necessary in order to keep their inks from rubbing together and damaging the surfaces of both. Yet the text takes a philosophical turn on the heels of this matter of practicality, asserting that "word and picture are essentially rivals." But are they? "Here we must separate," the text declares. But must we really? One wonders how strong a separation such a flimsy tissue could provide. Like midnight and like bed hangings, the interleaf is a remarkably liminal, "transitional," and "relational" space precisely because it is also a "zone of contention." Although the interleaf may succeed in keeping text from touching image, both text and image rub against the surfaces of the interleaf and leave some trace of themselves there.

Just as with the locket's "counterfeit presentment" in *Hamlet*, the prose on Howe's verso forms a double portrait with the recto and must have its say in order to fulfill *The Midnight's* double-vision. The second paragraph observes that the interleaf is now counterfeit, vestigial, and obsolete—and yet its obsolescence, its becoming "spectral," is the very source of its "enchanted aura." Curiously, the interleaf's ghostly transformation serves to render it more, rather than less, corporeal. In the phrase "each spectral scrap intact in a handed down book," "intact" and "handed" are puns: the scraps of paper remain intact—whole—but also *in tact*—in touch—with all those who have *handled* and *handed* down their books, just as John and Mary Manning have handed down their books to Howe. As their hands passed over the

interleaves and pages of their books, Howe's uncle and mother left their marks on the pages' surfaces. The sheet of the interleaf draws life from this commingling of hand, image, and text, and becomes a living tissue in its own right: "Wonderfully life-like, approaching transparency, not shining: this pale or wanly yellow, tangible intangible murderously gentle exile, mutely begs to be excused."

If the interleaf begins to sound like skin, this should not surprise us—writing surfaces like vellum, now made from tree pulp, were once fashioned from the scraped skins of calves. Although such knowledge seems only latent in this passage, it does underscore Howe's suspicion that something very blooded and real might be reanimated in the tissue of the interleaf through the acts of touching and rubbing. Precisely how one effects this rubbing in the interleaf, especially now in a modern era when text and image so seldom meet there, seems a pressing question. Perhaps one does not rub so much as leaf: "I slide my left thumb over the title page and grasp it with my forefinger, a clumsy motion as if my hand has a second character turning from text to picture from picture to text, as if the story inside its covers has another conscious life, or the way the living and the dead intermingle in ballads" (*The Midnight* 61). In this instance, it is the movement of the hand—its leafing—that literally animates the pages: text and image blur together as though they were a flipbook animation. Perhaps this is one way the body might activate or "enter" the space of the interleaf, at once so fitfully "tangible and intangible."

The hand that leafs is also the hand that cuts, collages, and embroiders Howe's text. Throughout *The Midnight*, Howe draws on lace as a central organizing principle for her collage aesthetic. The earliest images in



“Bed Hangings I” reproduce illustrations from Mrs. Bury Palliser’s *History of Lace*. The first image depicts the Infanta of Spain wearing a stiff neck ruff, thus emphasizing lace as a pattern to be worn on the body. In typical contradictory fashion, the second image shows a leftover scrap of lace, now no more than a piece of evidence or a clue torn from its original context. Here Howe is careful to develop a double-portrait of lace worked and unworked: lace as pattern and lace as matter.

In its most familiar form, lace is a pattern of nodes and interstices interlinked in an ordered fashion. Like Howe’s collage of materials and ideas, the constituent threads of lacework model the possibility of a nonlinear mode of relation between otherwise discontinuous objects and ideas. The affinities between needlework and a non-linear poetics are particularly evident in these lines from “Bed Hangings I”:

Counterforce bring me wild hope  
Non-connection is itself distinct  
Connection numerous surviving  
Fair trees wrought with a needle  
The merest decorative suggestion  
In what appears to be sheer white  
Muslin a tree fair hunted Daphne  
Thinking is willing you are wild

To the weave not the material itself (*The Midnight* 17)

Howe’s assertion that “Non-connection is itself distinct / Connection” insists on the validity of a fragmented and associative mode of relation that finds connection in states of adjacency and difference. Such a poetic logic appears vital as an alternative to more linear modes of relation, providing the poet a

kind of ecstatic entry into the wilderness of intertextual weavings and interleavings.

The mention of “numerous surviving / Fair trees” suggests Howe’s interest in survivals at history’s margins, especially those that descend from the thinnest filament or “merest decorative suggestion / In what appears to be sheer white / Muslin.” The particular survivals in question—the slight and delicate embroidery of trees—have been encoded and recorded in this history by a woman’s needle. The stanza becomes a question of precarious survivals—each moment in danger of receding into the blank, sheer white of the page, coming to aporia or silence, always in danger of returning to formlessness:

The earliest account of bed hangings is in a legend from the 11th century. After a run of bad luck a seamstress named Thorgunna got fed up and left her home somewhere in the stormy Outer Hebrides. In England it didn’t take long for special notice of the immigrant’s fantastically embroidered needlework to get around. Soon she was in danger of being promoted to the witch category. Trouble followed trouble until she warned that ownership of her hangings could mean curtains. Could be iffy. Throwing caution to the winds, she either burned or tossed her tapestries out. It’s an aesthetics of erasure. (*The Midnight* 44-5)

In this passage from “Cutwork,” Howe muses in tongue-and-cheek fashion on the seductive—and therefore dangerous—qualities of women’s textile (and by association, textual) work. Despite the ironic tone in which it is presented, the problem of how to preserve feminine production is very real. Thorgunna is

already at odds with the English because she is a foreigner, and her “fantastically embroidered needlework” is just foreign enough, just fantastic enough, to be suspected of dark magic. Her threats, though they pun wonderfully, are of little avail: “ownership of her hangings could mean curtains” could mean that purchasers of her hangings are punishable by death, or that her own executioners will be punished by death, or very plainly, that her tapestries may be used as curtains. Rather than burn as a witch herself, she finally sets flame to her tapestries, and there is no trace of them left for us, except what survives through Howe’s “iffy” narrative. For Howe these erasures, these moments of absence or silence in history, are far too often the specter of a feminine voice. It seems no coincidence that the form of *The Midnight* takes as its poetic model a distinctly feminine mode of production that treats absence as a constitutive necessity: lace depends on the negative space of its eyelets as much as it does on its threads.

Often it is the language of received history that erases the voices Howe seeks, though their traces beckon to her through linguistic wilderness. As we see in *The Midnight*, it is the task of the writer, but also of the reader, to weave a particular path through that wilderness. Howe sets out to find her mother, of course, but also herself, and her others—those she reads, and those who read her. In writing, the poet must give herself over to the wildness of the weave, and yet she no doubt traces a degree of order in her wake, however associative, fragmented, or non-linear her embroidery might be. This double-vision of design and wilderness is easily accommodated by the fixity and fluidity that characterize Howe’s cutwork processes of lacework and collage. Within her insomniac cutworks, apparent opposites can become simultaneously true, and a relational space between what is here and now,

and what is not, becomes possible.

As a material structure, lace embodies both a fixity and a fluidity not unlike Howe's description of her "own vocabulary as something hopelessly mixed and at the same time hardened into glass" (*The Midnight* 75). As a structure that gathers disparate threads and nodes together into constellatory associations, lace is indeed fluid, but these associations also coalesce into an ordered, fixed pattern. This tension between fixity and fluidity, rather than resolving itself, gives rise to a second tension between figure and ground. The material of the lace itself and the pattern it forms might be called its figure, but the structure of lacework is equally defined by the negative spaces of its holes, its absences. As such the form of lace is that of a multifaceted frame, providing the reader with a persistent, simultaneous awareness of frame and framed. The situation of viewing and reading is further complicated by the fact that lace provides not just a single eyelet, but multiple perspectives through which to look and read.

In his essay "Frame lock," Charles Bernstein argues that it is precisely a keen awareness of one's own frame that allows the reader to stave off the particular evil he dubs "frame lock." At stake for both reader and writer in the double and multiple visions of Howe's lacework is an "unlocked" textual practice that provides an ability to think otherwise—a textual practice answerable to the simultaneity of two states of being, two truths. As a model of reading, lace portends the education of a new set of readers for whom female artists and their works might be acknowledged and retained rather than absorbed or erased. By Bernstein's definition, frame lock is "the insistence on a univocal surface, minimal shifts of mood either within paragraphs or between paragraphs, exclusion of extraneous or contradictory

material, and tone restricted to the narrow affective envelope of sobriety, neutrality, objectivity, authoritativeness, or deanimated abstraction. In frame-locked prose, the order of the sentences and paragraphs is hypotactic, based on a clear subordination of elements to an overriding argument that is made in a narrative or expository or linear fashion” (92). It is as though Bernstein has described *The Midnight* entirely in negative. Whereas frame lock produces a kind of monologism—a “univocal surface”—that subverts, suppresses, and oppresses forms of otherness in its wake, the cutwork of *The Midnight* refuses a single voice or tone and challenges to the reader not to forget herself within her frame, or to grow complacent and accepting of the monologic, linear narratives of history, gender and sexuality, class, or race.

Given the urgency of avoiding frame lock, we might wonder precisely how a writer or reader might do that. What would an un-locked writer/writing/reader/reading look like? In formulating his answer to this question, Bernstein proffers a textual form uncannily like that of *The Midnight*: “My method... is to place one thing side by side with another and another, so that the series creates multiple perspectives on the issues addressed” (96-7). But Bernstein has a further demand, this time for the reader:

I do not propose alternating between two subjects or two frames... I am suggesting a potentially endless series that does not return to the point of its comparison...whose origin is departure, whose destination is in going on. One thing I want to break down is the virtually Kantian picture of the studier and the thing studied...I unclthe myself in addressing a poem, and the poem returns to show me my bearings, my comportment, and the way to read the

next poem or painting, person or situation. (97)

The reading practice Bernstein prescribes is one in which reader and text interpenetrate one another, so that the limits between them are lowered and traversed: this is Bernstein's anticipation of Howe's "Glide my shadow through / time curtains." Such readerly skills prepare Bernstein for the subsequent aesthetic and social interactions of trying to read a "poem or painting, person or situation." For Bernstein, this list draws a provocative equivalency being between the products of artistic making, and the makers themselves.

The unlocked reader is flexible, permeable, but therefore also vulnerable—he must unclothe himself in addressing the language of the poem, and yet clothe himself anew in its logic, or its lace, as the case may be in *The Midnight*:

"Opus scissum," as it was termed by her Keeper of the Great Wardrobe, was Queen Elizabeth's favorite form of lace. She wore cutwork "with lilies of the like, set with small seed pearls" on her ruffs and displayed it "flourished with silver and spangles" on her doublets, cushion cloths, veils, tooth-cloths, smocks, and nightcaps. I cut these two extracts from the Muses elizium (45)

Here Howe explicitly links lace and her act of collage not merely as theoretical analogues of one another, but also as things to be worn and embodied. As in Bernstein's essay, the boundaries between poetry and the body become permeable and indistinct. The lace-text is no longer a mere figment of in-betweenness, but a live tissue mapped onto the feminine body, drawing from

the living body a presence and vitality of its own—in much the same way as the interleaf comes into its spectral life when it contacts the fingers of the reader touching its surface: “Listen, quick rustling.” The body of the reader, its presence, is needed to activate and enliven the text.

But how does a reader clothe herself, literally, in the lace, cutwork, and collage of a text? What would it mean for to perform such a reading? In her 1986 interview with Janet Falon, Howe insists, “I am my ideal reader. This may sound elitist but it’s not” (42). Here optimism is not to be confused with elitism. The poet’s standards are high but not unattainable—she asks no less than that the reader is herself or someone like her, willing to lose herself in the wilderness of language. A reader whose engagement of the text will be so agile and tenacious as to rival its “original” author. By Howe’s logic, the reader must and does become author to the text—her text, her weave. As Howe elaborates in a later interview, “I write the way I read. I wouldn’t want the reader to be just a passive consumer. I would want my readers to play, to enter the mystery of language, and to follow words where they lead, to let language lead them” (31).

In *The Midnight*, our education as unlocked readers is well underway. At the center of “Scare Quotes I,” Howe offers an extended meditation (as an exhortation to the reader) on the virtues and pitfalls of cutwork readings:

*Pandora*

The relational space is the thing that’s alive with something from somewhere else. Jonathan Edwards was a paper saver. He kept old bills and shopping lists, then copied out his sermons on the verso sides and stitched them into handmade notebooks. When he was in his twenties,

Emerson cut his dead minister father's sermons in manuscript out of their bindings, then used the bindings to hold his own writings. He mutilated another of Emerson senior's notebooks in order to use the blank pages. (*The Midnight* 58)

We no doubt feel horror at the violation of the aura-laden original of Emerson senior's manuscript pages, with their irrecoverable trace of the author's now absent hand. There is something deeply disturbing in this abuse, but the "mutilation" also provides new life, or at least a kind of afterlife, for the materials the father has left behind for the son.

The books handed down to Howe—her uncle's copy of *The Master of Ballantrae* and her mother's books—are precious family heirlooms, preserving a line of inheritance across generations. And yet her family's treatment of books seems to teach us otherwise:

Disobeying Aunt Louie's predatory withdrawal, or preservative denial, I recently secured the spine of her Irish Song Book with duct tape. Damage control—its cover was broken. So your edict flashes daggers—so what....

Why shouldn't I? In all transactions in life we have to take a leap. My mother's relations treated their books as transitional objects (judging by a few survivors remaining in my possession) to be held, loved, carried around, meddled with, abandoned, sometimes mutilated. They contain dedications, private messages, marginal annotations, hints, snapshots, press cuttings, warnings—scissor work. Some volumes have been shared as scripts for family theatricals.



When something in the world is cross-identified, it just is.  
They have made this relation by gathering—airs, reveries,  
threads, mythologies, nets, oilskins, briars and branches,  
wishes and needs, intact—into a sort of tent. This is a space  
children used to play in. The country where they once  
belonged. (*The Midnight* 59-60)

Given this personal anecdote, and Howe's account of Emerson's writing practice, it requires only a very short leap of imagination to think that Howe has authorized the reader to treat *The Midnight* itself with the same mixture of reverence and disregard that Emerson and her family members showed their books. Here we might recall Howe's phrase from the introductory front matter, "Mischief delights in playing with surfaces." I can hardly think of a more apt characterization for the demands Howe's own book makes on its readers.

The poet is particularly sensitive to the mischief that was her mother. According to the Howe, Mary Manning delighted in playing with surfaces: "She loved to embroider facts. Facts were cloth to her. Maybe lying is how she knew she was alive because she felt trapped by something ruthless in her environment and had to beat the odds" (*The Midnight* 76). Here the lighter valences of "mischief" give way to something much more serious—it turns out that surface play and embroidered facts are not only questions of delight, but of survival. The "something ruthless" that threatens Mary Manning—as an authoress, actress, wife, mother, or woman—is evoked only in oblique terms, and seems to come from nowhere in particular, being ascribed to some environmental or social cause.

In another account of her mother, Howe recalls Manning's

restlessness, and her mother's continual moving between her Irish origins and her new American life:

Mary Manning had crossed the Irish Sea several times, though never the English Channel, and had crossed the Atlantic Ocean both ways twice (third class). Economic survival tactics during a time of war, revolution, counter-revolution, and the traumatic birth of a nation, meant setting out as a poor relation. So, after being an actress, a theatre critic, a magazine editor, the author of two plays and a novel, she arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1934 at the home of her Aunt Muriel where she met my father and became a faculty wife and mother.

Even into her nineties she kept leaving in order to arrive one place or another as the first step in a never ending process somewhere else. (*The Midnight* 119)

Here the crossing movements Mary Manning makes over the Irish Sea and Atlantic Ocean form a pattern of rude embroidery across geographical distance. Although the text acknowledges that these peregrinations are in part due to the necessity of economic and physical survival, there remains the implication that such efforts might not have been necessary, had any of the jobs in the long list of occupations provided adequate financial support. The final line suggests that, at least in 1934, all of the occupations to which her mother aspired were doomed from the start, and that as a woman, Mary Manning was destined to end a wife and a mother. If this end is a disappointment for a talented and ambitious woman, and the cause of her restlessness, it is something that the poet's father seems unable to

understand: “Throughout their married life my mother’s restlessness seems to have puzzled my father. As a liberal law professor he had problems with the nature of randomness and she could never be reached by appealing to pure abstraction (if abstraction is a form or a deed). ‘Your mother doesn’t know what truth is,’ he noted more than once. How could he believe she believed with evangelical fervor in the literal truth of the theatre” (*The Midnight* 134). Here Howe intimates that truth is a two-way street. Although her mother may not have known “what truth is,” she seems to have made her truth out of the very lies and fabrications of the playhouse.

*The Midnight* would make liars, embroiderers, and players of us all—and therefore, survivors. Such an engaged community of readers has particular promise for preserving marginal histories like that of Mary Manning, or Howe’s great-aunt Louie Bennett. Not only can historical texts be read otherwise, coalescing in new, de-centered relations with contemporary poetic and interpretive practices, but feminist—not to say exclusively female—readers and writers may form networks—laceworks—of support, writing and recording their mutual histories, such that the feminine voice, as well as other marginalized voices, no longer suffer the precarious fate of erasure.

### ***The Lacework Elegy***

For Howe laceworks are not only ways of citing literary predecessors and “unlocking” her own readers—laceworks are ways of bringing into presence her literal family. The project of gender politics in *The Midnight* is personal for Howe, not just for her own autobiographical status as female writer, but also

for the possibility it opens of bringing back her mother through the play and performance of cutwork. In the notes of his recent monograph on Howe, Will Montgomery provides a telling clue to Howe's practice as an elegist, reporting that "Howe cites Peter Sacks's book *The English Elegy* in her working notes: "The movement from loss to consolation requires a deflection of desire—with the creation of a trope both for the lost object and for the original characters of desire itself" (7).' She remarks, 'But if Sacks says castration lies at the core of the work of mourning what about female elegists?'" (190). What about female elegists indeed? Evidently Sacks' assertion some pages later that the castration model applies equally to men and women does not satisfy (12). Sacks interprets the work of elegy primarily as the poet's struggle to separate from and succeed the dead by replacing the loss with a compensatory poem (i.e. phallus): "The dead, like the forbidden object of a primary desire, must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words" (9). Whereas Sacks's veil serves the function of separation, it should be clear by now that the significance of the veil in *The Midnight* is as a medium of connection—whether veil, curtain, bedhangings, darkness, or language itself, liminal bodies are the material obstructions by which Howe traverses the limits between the living and the dead. *The Midnight* is Howe's answer to her own question and her refutation of Sacks's troubled gendering of the elegiac genre.

Therefore *The Midnight* belongs to a different breed of elegy entirely—one eloquently described by Celeste M. Schenck in her essay "Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy." Schenck argues, contrary to Sacks's definition, that feminine elegy depends on a work of connection rather than separation: "Built upon a different set of internalized relations with

predecessors, the female elegy is a poem of connectedness; women inheritors seem to achieve poetic identity in relation to ancestresses, in connection to the dead, whereas male initiates need to eliminate the competition to come into their own” (15). In Schenck’s description we find an elegiac model more apt for understanding the interlacings and collage of *The Midnight*, which seek to form connections among the poet, her readers, her poetic predecessors, and her family. Schenck explains that feminine revision of elegiac convention “not only deconstructs.... ahistorical, apolitical, and essentially mythic structures, [but] replaces them with connective tissue, fleshly bonds; [the female elegist] protests final separation by insisting upon not only the difficulty of severing substantial relations, but the potential for achieving identity by preserving those very relations in a kind of continuous present” (24). Here are the proper terms for describing that *fleshly* veil of the interleaf and the lacework text as it overlays and inscribes the surface of the body. For Howe, the lacework text is a theatrical costume, a millefleur of eyelets laid upon the body as a second skin. Thus the tactile surface of the body is literally imbued with a multiple vision. As the body of poet or reader enters and invigorates the text, the “relational space” opens onto the performance of a strange communal, perpetual elegy between the poet and her readers.

If there is a difference between Schenck’s account of the feminine elegy and *The Midnight*, it lies with Howe’s paradoxical assertion that the connective force comes through the act of severing, through the act of cutwork. After all, Howe is the poet who declares: “Non-connection is itself distinct / Connection.” Even so, “substantial relations” are only cut insofar as they are refashioned and reanimated anew in order to form that “continuous

present” between the living and dead that Schenck so astutely identifies. Thus lacework in *The Midnight* finally serves as a medium, connecting mother and daughter through a tactile theater of the material present. Stanzas like the following are not simply catalogue descriptions of lace:

1746 (fig. 39) A figured  
head cloth worked by  
Polly Wright of Hatfield  
Massachussetts in 1765  
(privately owned) (*The Midnight* 16)

Rather, they are examples of Howe’s poetics of presencing—as she puts it, “present present presentness” (*The Midnight* 12). It is an edict, and a guiding poetics: make present, right now, a material’s quality of being present.

One of the key materials Howe uses to raise her mother’s spirit is their shared copy of Yeats’ *Later Poems*, which contains an inscription of endearment from six of Manning’s fellow Irish actors. Howe reproduces an image of the text, together with artifacts found, and provides this textual description:

Inside, five narrow strips of what looks like wrapping paper, once meant to serve as markers, are still intact.

Each one has a faded title in pencil at the tip so all these years later I can just make out in her handwriting[...] Sometimes I arrange the four snippets as if they were a hand of cards, or inexpressible love liable to moods. I like to let them touch down randomly as if I were casting dice or reading tea leaves. “The Collar-bone of a Hare” has just fallen on “The Cap and Bells.” She

loved to embroider facts. Facts were cloth to her. Maybe  
lying is how she knew she was alive because she felt  
trapped by something ruthless in her environment and  
had to beat the odds.

The jester walked in the garden:  
The garden had fallen still;  
He bade his soul rise upward  
And stand on her window-sill.

We loved to read that one together. So when I  
read it now all the words fall softly over what we believed  
then and desired. (*The Midnight* 75-7)

In this passage the references to contact and the tactile sense mounts:  
“intact,” “handwriting,” “hand of cards,” “touch down,” and “all the words fall  
softly over.” Howe emphasizes that the five strips of paper have survived  
*intact*. They have survived—they live—through touch. As mere scraps of  
paper, Mary Manning’s bookmarks have little intrinsic value of their own. Like  
Emerson senior’s notebooks, however, they harbor that spectral aura that  
comes from the manuscript of the dead. Manning’s faint pencil marks trace  
hints of the movements of her hand. Rather than mutilate these scant  
artifacts, the poet handles them in a different kind of play. They become  
objects of superstition—cards, dice, or tea leaves—and

As her runes touch down, Howe’s attention settles on the first stanza  
of Yeats’ “Cap and Bells,” in which a jester at court and would-be suitor so  
yearns for the queen that he dies in order to send her his soul and his heart.

The window-sill in Yeats' poem is an interesting point of comparison with MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind*. In both texts a supernatural, ghostly presence attempts to reach a beloved through a window, but is repelled. In MacDonald's narrative, it is Diamond's plug of hay that thwarts the North Wind's entry. In Yeats' poem, the Queen herself shuts the window against the soul of her suitor: "She drew in the heavy casement / And pushed the latches down." Undeterred, the jester then sends his heart to her, now cloaked in "a red and quivering garment" and "grown sweet-tongued by dreaming / Of a flutter of her flower-like hair." Again the lady waves him off. The jester only succeeds in wooing her in death, and through the remnant of his garment, the cap and bells. When the Queen lays the fabric of the hat to her bosom, she begins to sing, and a miraculous scene unfolds: stars appear in the air—it is midnight—and the body (the heart) and the ghost (the soul) of the dead jester come to her through the window and door. In the final line of Yeats' poem, we find "the quiet of love" in the Queen's feet. She is restless no more. To read, speak, and touch the words of Yeats' poem—for Howe, and for us—is to enter the space of theater, and to bring quiet to Mary Manning's feet. The final poetic fragment in *The Midnight* reads:

I am still moving one wave  
twicewashed these are pas-  
times voice of evening half  
local gold half peregrine red  
Where the escaped and their  
frolic nobody knows aslant  
Style in one stray sitting I  
approach sometime in plain



handmade rag wove costume

awry what I long for array (*The Midnight* 173)

As if to illustrate Schenck's concept of the continuous present, Howe's final lines assert the poet's presence: she is continually moving, a wave "twicewashed" between the Irish and American shorelines, between her mother and her father, and between the dead and the living. The poet watches the setting sun, "half / local gold" and "half peregrine red," and thinks of the far shores, the impossibilities, that its amber glow connects. In her final appearance, the poet wears a "plain / handmade rag wove costume / awry" that is the lacework text of *The Midnight* itself. The poet's garb is that of a pauper or orphan, the barest covering worn askew, and ultimately, it cannot satisfy. As the pages of *The Midnight* close, the curtains fall on the stage of its relational space. The performance has reached its end, and its power to return to us in the present that which is absent or silent cannot survive beyond its material body. Still, when it is read and re-read, *The Midnight* is precisely that intermediate tissue between the past and the present, and the living and the dead, between the text and the image, and the reader and the writer. The lacework text gathers all these impossibilities abundantly, in a vibrant elegy, full with the promise of poetry's poietic potential to make real, material, and present—for a time.

## CHAPTER THREE

### **‘TOUCH IN TRANSIT’: MANIFESTATION / MANIFESTCIÓN IN CECILIA VICUÑA’S *CLOUD-NET***

*“I am a mixed person, a person of two cultures.... I use everything because I want to ask them all to remember. I write, I sing, I weave at the same time, because I’m at the moment of emergency, at the moment of danger, when you actually feel that all of this could go away. Life itself could go away. The web can disappear. So I work on that edge”*  
(Vicuña, cloud-net 20)

In an oeuvre spanning over forty years, Chilean poet and artist Cecilia Vicuña has lived and worked in continual translation between languages, cultures, and media. Born in Santiago de Chile in 1948, Vicuña produced her first two- and three-dimensional artworks in the mid-1960s. She later left to study in London, where she remained in exile following Pinochet’s military coup in 1973. Since 1980, Vicuña has lived in New York and returned regularly to Chile, though the country of her youth has been irrevocably changed. It is perhaps only fitting that such a restless history should give rise to Vicuña’s remarkably diverse artistic practice, which includes not only poetry, drawing, painting, and sculpture, but also film, installation, earthworks, dance, song, and theater. In many of her projects, Vicuña fuses the textual, visual, and material arts into multi-sensory, multi-dimensional performances. This radical explosion of form is powerfully felt in *cloud-net*, Vicuña’s response to the

threats of globalization, global warming, and species loss through song, dance, film, multi-site art installations, and a book of cross-genre poetry.

Because the overall project of *cloud-net* is so multiply embodied, it is difficult to trace the limits of its spatial, temporal, aesthetic, and ethical unfoldings. As an art installation, *cloud-net* was originally shown at Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center (Buffalo, 1998), Diverseworks Artspace (Houston, 1999), and Art in General (New York, 1999). Within and without the gallery spaces, lengths of white, unspun wool were suspended and interlaced in loose, fluid matrices. As the installation traveled from one site to another, its woolen “cloud-nets” were undone, and then woven anew. At times Vicuña read, sang, danced, and performed with volunteer participants among the installations and in the streets outside the galleries. Still photographs from Vicuña’s documentary film show scenes from these performances in the book *cloud-net*, published by Art in General, alongside photographs of the installations, an interview with the artist, critical essays, and a number of polyglot visual poems. All of these things—these texts, these materials, these bodies—belong to the work called *cloud-net*.

What most asserts itself about the *cloud-net* installations, performances, film, and book, is a shared emphasis on sheer materiality and the tethering of bodies, texts, and materials through tactile connection. In conversation with Billie Jean Isbell and Regina Harrison, Vicuña recalled that her mother once said to her, “My dear daughter, your eyes aren’t in your fingertips”; Vicuña explained, “She was trying to bring me up properly in Chilean society where it is not proper to touch everything. But on the other hand, she was a sensual person herself, my Mother” (de Zegher 52). What is it about touch that is not quite proper? The word “proper” includes notions of

ownership, and when considered with regard to touch, calls attention to questions of intersubjective boundaries, sovereignty, and agency. Perhaps touch has a transgressive quality simply by virtue of its enactment of contact. Whereas visual or auditory exchange takes place across distance, touch depends upon an inescapable collapse of space between one body and another. While one may look without being seen looking, touch is defined by its reciprocity: the moment we move to touch, we are vulnerable. We surrender ourselves to being touched in return. Having come to know Vicuña and her work personally, I find that contrary to her mother's admonishment, the poet's eyes are located *precisely* in her fingertips. Touch permeates every aspect of her vision, and persists across all of her undertakings, whether in poetry, painting, woven textile, sculpture, song, dance, performance, installation, or film. Though her mother might have discouraged tactile exploration, Vicuña reflects in her poetic autobiography *Quipoem* that "when a girl is born her mother puts a spider in her hand, to teach her to weave," implying that her own tactile weavings of language, wool, and bodies descend from a matrilineal source (22).

In her article on *Quipoem*, "Precarious Resistance: Weaving Opposition in the Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña," Juliet Lynd observes that the poet "experiments with visual poetry in conjunction with photographs, of Chile and her art, to infuse writing with the dynamism of visuality," thereby reconstructing "cultural memory in ways that function as an antidote to official memory" (1594). In this regard, *cloud-net* is similar to Vicuña's earlier works, with one significant difference: *cloud-net* relies primarily on the sense of touch, beyond any "visual dynamism," not only to redress official histories, but to reorder and rewrite the conditions of the present world. The sense of

touch, with its promise of intersubjective reciprocity and maternal connection, drives Vicuña's vision for ethical interactions between the self and the other. As *cloud-net* gradually reveals, the failure of ethical exchange between peoples, and between humanity and the planet, has set the globe on a course of economic and ecological destruction. As an antidote to such widespread danger, *cloud-net* proposes a perpetual movement between two opposite but complementary modes of poïesis: manifestation and manifestación.

*Manifestation* refers to the physical transformation that occurs when the poet's words take on a material, tactile form in and beyond the page of the book, such that the poetic vision and the material world meet and co-create one another. But for Vicuña, the process of manifestation also necessitates its complementary counter-force, *manifestación*. Taken from the Spanish for "demonstration" or "protest," *manifestación* describes a poetic rewriting of the world not through progress, but through encumbrance, obstacle, protest, and stoppage. While *cloud-net* certainly manifests an opening between the imagined and the real, it also slows its participants in order to engender deep reflection and ultimately, a shift in collective consciousness. The idea of language that acts in the world directly places *cloud-net* within the realm of the ritual, the spiritual, and the incantatory, and it is a challenge to maintain suspension of disbelief to the extent required. Vicuña's faith in the poïetic powers of language is no doubt exceptional, and her emphasis of tactility in the *cloud-net* installations and text is all the more vital for concretizing her vision and rendering it palpable for others. To the extent that *cloud-net* materializes the poet's incantations and arrests our progress through its many cloud-nets, we readers participate in its work and begin to deliver not only Vicuña's alternative visions of the world, but our own.

## ***manifestation***

*“The poem is not speech, not in the earth, not on paper, but  
in the crossing and union of the three in the place that is  
not.” —(Vicuña, “Purmamarca” cited in de Zegher 73)*

Because *cloud-net* is part ephemeral installation, its full breadth remains inexorably, if tantalizingly, absent, and in large part unrecoverable, except as it returns in the imagination’s dark glass<sup>1</sup>. Even if we could objectively delimit the content of *cloud-net*, it is equally difficult to determine in which temporal register we ought to address its work. This is because *cloud-net* is a continual process, a work that waits for completion, and subsequent dissolution, that emerges in the life it takes on in the bodies of its readers and viewers, only to fall away again, and again to return. No doubt it is already difficult to imagine what form a crossing and union of speech, earth, and paper might take, let alone how this union would happen in a place that does not exist. *cloud-net* is one tentative attempt to manifest this impossible vision. Impossible, because no material condition can adequately embody such undifferentiated immanence. Because *cloud-net* must happen, and must take form, it must also fail. And yet none of its failures are final—each new collapse brings an opportunity and a renewed attempt to reach that “place that is not.”

Like a field that lies dormant under snow, or the unmarked blank of the page, Vicuña’s weaving of speech, earth, and paper describes a state of unrealized potential. It is the state that pre-exists emergence, before any actual condition comes into being. Before the world as it is, in all its precarious danger and beauty, arrives. The problem with the present world is

that it necessarily sets conditions upon the imaginative faculties of the poet and others, thereby limiting their ability to find redress through language. In *cloud-net*, the bi-lingual poem “Illapa” casts the picture of this utopian no-place in distinctly Andean terms, describing a series of counter-forces, or dialectics undone and negated:

El brillo	the remote
remoto	shine
del primer	of first
poder	possibility
no el acto	neither act
ni el gesto	nor gesture
si no	its crease
su doble	
	trance
trans	of the form
de la forma	
	world
mundo	inside-out
al envés	
	Illapa
ni truenos	
ni rayos	not
	thunder

ni relam	
paguear	nor rays
si no	nor lightening
tras	touch
tocar	in transit
el uno en tres	one in three
el ruido	light
en luz	in noise
la luz	noise
en ruidal	in light (64-65)

In the same way their lines describe hinges of act and gesture, of light and noise, the columns of Spanish and English stanzas in “Illapa” straddle the gutter between two facing pages, as though the actual poem emanated from somewhere deep within that intervening blankness. Although the Spanish appears left of this visual divide, and is the “original” in the sense of having being written by the author, its position is not necessarily privileged over the English half (translated in collaboration with Rosa Alcalá). Careful reading of the two halves of the poem reveals conspicuous slippages in meaning between certain stanzas, and it becomes evident that the two sides are not, despite initial appearances, faithful translations of one another. Rather, their



relation is complementary, and meaning in “Illapa” emerges finally from the friction where the two languages touch.

The most notable slippages in the poem come from the differences between “del primer / poder” and “of first / possibility,” between “trans” and “trance,” and between “tras / tocar” and “touch / in transit.” Though “poder,” “potencial,” and “posibilidad” are etymologically linked, “poder” translates literally as “power” or “force” rather than “possibility.” While the Spanish line suggests a primal or original force and the beginnings of a creation narrative, the English translation is careful to avoid the coercive connotations of “power” or “force,” preferring instead to suggest a more cooperative version of creation. Together the Spanish and English reveal that the state of first possibility is pregnant with power precisely because the primal force is pregnant with possibility. This formulation is of course inescapably tautological—such is the nature of any big bang. Because it is undetermined and still to be written at this early stage, the “brillo remoto” of the creation narrative retains ultimate power and infinite poietic possibility.

In the pairing of “trans” and “trance,” the former is a false cognate for the latter. While “trance” is identical in both languages, “trans” does not belong to Spanish at all. Rather, “trans” is the Latinate prefix meaning “across” or “beyond,” and it is among the most important words Vicuña uses to describe her aesthetics of the in-between. The lines “trans / de la forma” indicate both a state of formlessness (i.e. of being beyond form), but also a crossing of forms, as in the multi-site, multi-dimensional embodiments of *cloud-net*. These different possibilities reconcile in the lines “trance / of the form,” which seem to describe the formless, meditative state of mind—neither perfectly conscious nor unconscious—the poet and readers must

cultivate in order to move in and among the many modes of reading and experience that *cloud-net*'s various forms demand.

The English half of “Illapa” names the ancient Andean deity directly in its lines, and specifies that he is not thunder, rays, nor lightning, but “touch / in transit.” This touching is two-fold: it is the touching of the thunder, rays, and lightning as they unite in one body, but also the touch they initiate between heaven and earth, the divine and the mundane. In the Spanish version, “tras / tocar” (literally “after touching”) suggests that the touching has already occurred, as in a trace, whereas “touch / in transit” suggests the touching has yet to happen—but also, that this touching will occur within a trans- and trance-like state. The dual temporality of the poem is important for thinking about the touch of the divine hand on earth. In one sense it has already happened—the universe has already spun out from its center and taken form, and the energy left by that touch remains as an immanent trace in the ontological world. Yet the current state of the world, its precariousness, makes the poet long for a renewal of that earlier time when we were closer to the first divine touch. In this sense, the touch is still to arrive, or is continually in the process of manifestation, as is the case in *cloud-net*'s performances.

As the poem invites us into its trance, its words act as an incantation, calling into being the very moment of origination, that “brillo remoto.” If that distant “place that is not” is the interstitial locus of potentiality, to return there is to grasp at some remnant of the original creative force. In conversation with David Levi-Strauss, Vicuña describes *cloud-net* as “an attempt to speak back to the elements, to that instant of all potential, all creation, when we could take a new evolutionary leap, although I prefer to say a leap of imagination, equivalent to that of the moment when a hand noticed that

fleece could be spun into yarn” (*cloud-net* 20). Here Vicuña explicitly links the hand’s tactile response to fleece with the power to return to an original “instant of all potential, all creation” and thus, it is touch that precedes the power of imagining and refashioning the world as it is *otherwise*.

In the poem’s notes, Vicuña tells us that Illapa, also called Pachacuti or “world reverser,” is the deity in control of “fluidity and rain.” The name itself “condenses thunder, lightning, and thunderbolt,” as the poem’s line “one in three” suggests (*cloud-net* 95). That Illapa controls precipitation and holds the key to world reversal is no mere coincidence, for Vicuña tells us that precipitation is a way of measuring the earth’s endangerment, and that the absence or decline of precipitation is a warning among South American peoples:

The ancient inhabitants of the Amazon spoke of the mist of the mountains and the mists of the forests. They said that when the mist is gone, we will all be gone.... if we valued poetic utterance, we would recognize the power of their warning. It’s a warning that they created thousands of years ago for themselves, because they also lived and worked in this place. They paid attention to the relation. They said the way we move in the mist effects [sic] the mist. Weaving against death is a way of remembering, or relating to the earth and each other in a different way. (*cloud-net* 20-21)

“Effect” or “affect”? Although “effects” may be a mistake of transcription in this passage, it is difficult to say which homophone is intended because Vicuña’s argument collapses the difference between “affect” as influence and “effect” as poïesis. It is precisely this elision that makes manifestation—and

*manifestación*—possible in *cloud-net*. Still, “Illapa” cannot simply return to some primal force or to an ancient, pre-industrial world. We find ourselves already in the midst of global economic and environmental crises. What is needed is something still more impossible—a cloud-net to cover and cool the earth, to encumber us and slow our industry, and to reverse the damage already done.

While Vicuña derives the title “cloud-net” from Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem, *Savitri*, the form and material of her *cloud-net* installations are markedly Andean<sup>2</sup> and draw on Pre-Columbian traditions of spinning and weaving. The poet notes that the actions of spinning and weaving share an essential kind of motion with the very genesis of the universe:

As I see it, it must have happened on all continents where there are woolly animals. Of course, the first weaving must have been the crisscrossing of grass and twigs, for building a nest or a shelter to give birth, or twisting vines to make rope. But to get from that early imitative gesture to spinning wool required a powerful leap of imagination—noticing, perhaps, that any piece of wool, either caught by the wind or by an object in passing, tends to form a spiral. When a person rubs these two fingers together, whatever is between the fingers spins, either to the right or to the left. Everything around us has this spinning energy in it, which probably originates in the first spiraling energy coming out of the big bang, spinning things out from a center. (*cloud-net* 18)

The potential of the unspun wool, and of the concept and form of the line in *cloud-net*’s poems and installations, is so critical for Vicuña’s project. The

woolen skein is a material, political, poetic, and poietic line, drawing the strength to sustain all these senses from its connection with the Andean recordkeeping system called quipu, in which knotted cords were used to encode data.

In “Quipu: Knotting Account in the Inka Empire,” Gary Urton summarizes the construction methods and materials of some 600 extant quipus. The single and long knots in the quipus’ pendant strings form a decimal system for recording numbers, and Urton notes that the materials, colors, and ply-directions of the strings themselves most likely provide further context or meaning for the encoded numbers (50-53). What remains uncertain, as Urton explains elsewhere in “An Overview of Spanish Colonial Commentary on Andean Knotted-String Records,” is the quipus’ capacity for narrative and their mutual intelligibility as a system of writing (20). Did the quipukamayuc, the makers and keepers of the quipus, actually read their narratives from the quipus, or were the knotted strings little more than schematic aids to memory? This distinction may not be so straightforward as it seems, when one considers the work of Robert and Marcia Ascher, who together documented a number of non-decimal quipus. Marcia Ascher hypothesizes that these non-decimal quipus in particular may use the numbering system as labels, and therefore as the seeds of narrative, rather than as markers of magnitude (87). For Vicuña, there is no question. In my conversation with the poet in the summer of 2009, she was adamant that “language can be completely physical, can be completely tactile.... because it is completely tactile when it becomes, for example, a thread—a thread is language. This is not a metaphor. This is so” (2).

Before considering the affinities of form between the quipus and *cloud-net*, it is also important to note some significant differences between them. Perhaps the most striking difference is that of construction. Whereas the quipus encode data through a hierarchical system, all parts of the *cloud-net* installations exist simultaneously in a conspicuously democratic, constellatory arrangement of materials and the participants' bodies. And while the quipus further encode meaning through the knotting, plying, and coloring of their pendant strings, the skeins of wool in the *cloud-net* installations are without these features. It appears that these methods of encoding in quipus are already too differentiated and determined for Vicuña. The white, unspun wool seems a conscious choice, as though the material in that state were still more primal, still closer to the "brillo remoto" described in "Illapa."

As with the quipus, the memory and meaning of *cloud-net* can be woven and unwoven, imbuing the work with a flexibility often attributed only to the immaterial. The tactile interaction between the poet's body and the quipu-like skeins of wool constitutes a sort of magic, where language is concrete and available for direct manipulation. Vicuña explains this magic as a transfer of knowledge through the sense of touch: "When you touch this particular material, this unspun wool, it transmits knowledge to the fingers" (*cloud-net* 21). This transference is not (merely) metaphorical: at the instant of contact, the wool is language, and the language is wool. Thus the meaning of the *cloud-net*, as with quipus, is nebulous and conditioned by its continual making and remaking in the hands of the poet, as well as its participants and readers. The importance of this shared manifestation is apparent in Vicuña's conversation with Craigie Horsfield in "What Art May Be":

... Pre-Columbian culture which is a culture that was extremely dependent on the knowledge that people arrived at through the ecstatic experience, through the experience of the trance, through the experiences where people are aware that they are larger than themselves, it seems to me that all the basic art forms of the pre-Columbian peoples, the big dances, the big music, are specifically designed through thousands and thousands of years of exploration for this experience—the moment where you are at once yourself and a member of the community.... if you go to a festival today, in Chile.... you as a foreigner can experience exactly this same trance because the precision of the method of arriving at this trance has been created through millennia and you can come there from another culture and get it. (116-17)

Here Vicuña articulates the lasting power of the ecstatic experience and of operating as part of a collective consciousness. It is no coincidence that each cloud-net she weaves is an instantiation of just such a community, gathered together across three cities in a collaborative effort on the part of the artist, gallery directors, construction crews, and community members, all taking part together in *cloud-net*'s “big dances” and “big music.”

The very materials and structures of the *cloud-net* installations gesture toward collaborative processes of making, invoking not only ancient Andean traditions of weaving, but also the digital social networking of our contemporary world. The first opening of poetry in *cloud-net* features an untitled poem on the left, and on the right, an image of a woman kneeling in the gallery space, her face obscured by bunched skeins of unspun wool. The

typography of the poem is unconventional, exploiting the horizontal and vertical axes of the page, and recalling to some degree the structure of the wool skeins in the gallery:

h

a

n

g

i

n

g

by a thread

the

web

says: www

we will weave

una puerta llorosa

y piedras en los pies

a weeping door

and stones on your feet

web up

web on



re a lida des  
a linea das

weaving clouds  
against death  
(*cloud-net* 30)

The World Wide Web hangs by a thread, literally, with each of the letters of “hanging” enjambed in a tenuous vertical line. Yet this precarious web of loosening global ties is also the World Wide Web that finds potential salvation within its own name and utterance: “www.” From the “www” of World Wide Web, Vicuña derives the collective affirmation “we will weave.” This affirmation hangs in the far right margin, however, and the viewer’s eye falls to the next stanza with the somber realization that any weaving against death will not be easy. The line “una puerta llorosa” echoes a later poem, “Illapantac,” which addresses the pain of biological reproduction (here the feminine noun “puerta” suggests the birth canal more strongly than its English counterpart). Both poems emphasize struggle—in this first poem, the struggle of writing, and in “Illapantac,” the “lida” in “fertilidad.” Thus the lines in this poem, “re a lida des / a linea das,” align the struggle to lineate (linea) a poem or gallery installation and to birth a weaving against death, an alternative “realidad.” The burden of the struggle is too great—it must be shared through the cooperative weaving of a global web.

In the longest of *cloud-net*’s poems, “Er,” the precarious “hanging” of the previous poem gains a visual counterpart in the word “spinning.” The two words appear as typographic reflections of one another, as though they were a pair of complementary opposites, with “hanging” as a condition of

precarious uncertainty, and “spinning” as a description of generation and poïesis. “Er” is a structurally complex poem, comprised of Vicuña’s personal narrative, documentary photographs and film stills, and an appropriation of the fable of Er from *The Republic*. Vicuña begins the poem in the mode of personal narrative, describing a particular performance staged in New York as part of *cloud-net*:

I invited a group of dancers to join me in an unannounced event.  
Entirely by chance, only three girls came, Rosa, Luisa and Alicia.

They were late and the place had become dusk  
The darkness becoming light as they danced and wove

I thought of the three Moerae: Clotho, Lachesis & Atropos

s

p

i

n

n

i

n

g

life and death

(*cloud-net* 34)

The number of dancers responding to the poet’s call is understood as auspicious, as Vicuña reads the three girls in mythic guise as the very figures of Fate: Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos. In *The Republic*, the three spinners of

Fate sit astride the Spindle of Necessity, which is the model of the universe and the mechanism that casts cosmic destiny. For Vicuña, this spindle at the center of the universe confirms her intuition that the twirling of the fingers in spinning wool echoes the spiraling genesis of the Big Bang. In this performance and poem, it is the dancing of the three girls—the entirety of their bodies—that spirals and weaves in and throughout the cloud-net.

The images that accompany “Er” in the *cloud-net* text come from a series of still photographs taken from the accompanying documentary film. The dancers are shown in silhouette, entwined with the webs of wool woven across the pier. Their hands pull at the wool in places, and their bodies form and reform the web as they touch its woolen skeins; in turn, the web tangles and encumbers their movements, so that the women adjust their bodies to the web. Together, the dancers and web perform a process of mutual inscription, of reciprocal, tactile translation. A giant cat’s cradle, they dance, making the surrounding space over in a moment of poïesis, “the darkness becoming light.” As the performance continues, the darkness of the photographs begins to lift, and the faces and the bodies of the individual dancers become visible in the frame. The final four images are close-ups—the first three of a tangled cat’s cradle being manipulated and held over the pier’s barrier, and the final image, of the massed wool sinking in the water.

The collectivity of the dancers’ bodily weavings as they manifest light from a state of darkness is essential to the question of Fate proposed by the poem. In Homer’s earliest description of the Moerae in *The Odyssey*, the destiny they make for mortal man seems set in stone: “he must look to meet whatever events his own fate and the stern Spinners twisted into his thread of destiny when he entered the world and his mother bore him” (80). Yet in *The*

*Republic*, the fable of Er offers a different version of Fate, in which the choice of the individual is pivotal. On the eighth day of being between heaven and earth, Er bears witness as the prophet for Lachesis proclaims: “Mortal souls, behold a new cycle of life and mortality. Your genius will not be allotted to you, but you will choose your genius; and let him who draws the first lot have the first choice, and the life which he chooses shall be his destiny” (392-93). Following from *The Republic*, then, destiny is something to which the mortal elects, for better or for worse, and it seems on the strength of this version of fate that Vicuña proposes her own conceptual translation of the fable of Er:

but fate is not  
the force that predetermines events  
as the dictionary says  
fate is to speak  
and you fate yourself  
as you speak  
a turn of phrase becoming blood  
your destiny,

(*cloud-net* 30)

The poem suggests that one comes into being as a fated subject through the speech act—the subject simultaneously speaks and fates herself, claiming the divine power of the word made flesh. In the context of *cloud-net*, the word made flesh is more simply the word made manifest, made tactile, made material—the poetic line and the quipu-like skein of wool, as one.

As Vicuña acknowledges each dancer-spinner’s power of self-determination, she begins to cede the authority of her singular prophetic

voice. Her role becomes more like that of a catalyst or wedge, splintering the cultural and spatio-temporal divisions between Plato's text and the present of the New York performance:

and there  
in that intermediate space

(it was the South Finger Pier in lower Manhattan  
a cool summer night)

in that between ness  
they were told:  
*you will be the messenger*  
*of what you see*  
dancing and balancing  
the thread in the air

bladers passed by  
waving their blades  
weavers waving  
their waves

*(cloud-net 34-36)*

With these lines, Vicuña makes her translation of the fable even more apparent by dispersing the role of Er as visionary messenger among the three dancing girls, already figured as the Moerae. The curious eruptions of the "real" space of lower Manhattan and its rollerblading passersby into the space of the fable call into question the mythical status of the fable and the real status of Manhattan. Here we see the extent to which Vicuña

understands the poetic and material worlds as continuous with one another, bleeding across a curious pocket of the “trans,” or “between ness” The weaving dancers activate and sustain that liminal state: “dancing and balancing the thread in the air,” they manifest an opening between poetic vision and the material world—the “no place” that is the proper domain of poïesis. Even the rollerbladers of Manhattan are recuperated within this mythical and global weaving, the motion of their curving blades initiating a dialogue of gestures with the waving of the dancing weavers.

In the final lines of the poem, the web, now energized and transformed by the touch of the dancing weavers’ bodies, is cast into the water, as though it were a sacrificial offering:

the thread pulsating and throbbing  
a heart in the sea

*and in the extremities of it three girls*

pushed to the edge  
by the force of its spin  
*spinning of Necessity*  
three girls singing  
at once  
of the present  
the future and the past

*spinner*  
*allotment*

*and neverturnback*

each one a portion,

a fragment of ourselves

*(cloud-net 38)*

The voices of the three dancing girls rise and unite in a single song—they are the answer to the “one in three” of “Illapa,” the union and crossing of the three that will shift and reverse the course of the globe. Here the woolen web takes on an arterial quality—the lengths and tangles of its strands pulsate with the life given to it by the energy of the weaving and dancing, just as the blood vessels in the dancers’ bodies begin to course with blood from the vigor of the dance. As the woolen heart sinks in the water, it disperses and impregnates the sea. From this dissolution, as the film’s captions stress, a new net is born.

### ***manifestación***

*“As the weather becomes more extreme, the difference*

*between the rich and poor intensifies, diseases go wild, and*

*the poet dreams of enlarging her stitch, of cooling herself*

*and the earth at once.” (cloud-net 91)*

Throughout her visit to Cornell University in the fall of 2008, one of the things that most impressed me about Vicuña was her pithy sense of humor, which is immediately apparent in conversation, but sometimes more subtle her writing.

And yet the manifestation performed in the *cloud-net* poems, while certainly belonging to spiritual and visionary registers, happens—can only happen—through Vicuña’s engagement with gross matter. The interactions between the mythical and the real that take place in the poem “Er” form a biting dialogue between poetic and actual, heavenly and earthly planes, as in these few lines: “a woman, angry at a thread / caught in her bike said: / ‘is this a booby trap?’” to which the poem offers the wry reply, “only in your mind” (*cloud-net* 38). To some extent the poem is in earnest—the fetters the bicyclist experiences are the result of her own perceptions—but ultimately the poem’s challenge to the bicyclist is unmistakable. As a moment of earthly exchange, the bicyclist anecdote not only deflates the otherwise prophetic tone in “Er,” but it also points to the strength of *cloud-net*’s very real, very physical existence. Certainly *cloud-net* is an inclusive gesture, one that invites the audience to participate in the manifestation and manipulation of a shared, material language. The artist and the audience enact a vision together, each generating a previously unavailable relation to each other, and to the world at large. But as the woman on the bicycle illustrates, not all people are willing participants in this process, and the manifestation of *cloud-net* does meet with certain hostilities. In the face of such hostilities, *cloud-net* serves as something other than just so much weaving and togetherness. As the bicycle rider fails to recognize, or perhaps recognizes all too well, *cloud-net*’s poietic power lies not only in its manifestation of vision and community, but also in its manifestación of challenge, encumbrance, and obstacle.

In two of *cloud-net*’s more overtly political poems, “Sweatshop” and “dheu,” Vicuña ponders in succession the human bodies bent in the service of sweatshops and an earth swelled with the heat and pressure of climate



change. In both poems the language dwells on gross, earth-bound sensory imagery, such as the sweat from exploited workers' bodies and the foul smells rising from the city's vents. Read in tandem, the poems suggest that the plight of the sweatshop workers and the pillaging of the earth's resources are coeval conditions:

Sweat  
is the scripture  
going up  
in smoke

oscuras plegarias  
tejiendo en sudor

lengua del canso  
escribe tu olor

the cloud  
is sweat  
nubes  
a rás

la fuerza  
enterrada

juntando  
vapor

ghostly speech  
criss crossing the street  
(*cloud-net* 76)

The text of “Sweatshop” is juxtaposed with a photograph of Cortlandt Alley in New York City. The view is from street-level, and the camera tilts upward, revealing the staggering heights of steel fire escapes and anonymous brick façades. Small wisps of steam escape skyward from exhaust pipes and vents in the walls. Of course, these small clouds are the exhaust from machines inside the buildings, but the poem also insists that the steam rises as sweat from the bodies of sweatshop workers: “the cloud / is sweat,” a “ghostly speech / criss crossing the street.” “Sudor,” “olor,” and “vapor” (“sweat,” “stench,” and “vapor”) are end-rhymed, cementing the shared bodily conditions from which they rise. Not all clouds in *cloud-net* are pure, and not all weavings good; the ghostly weavings of the sweatshop workers’ sweat lifts their seldom-heard plight heavenward, and the poem translates the exhaust of their bodies as scripture and “oscuras plegarias” (literally, “dark prayers”). The dark prayers are like the ritual burning of incense, and offer communication with the divine through a transformation of earthly materials. These criss-crossing, ghostly voices of the sweatshop workers weave a dark negative of the pure woolen cloud-nets of the galleries, and function instead to slow and provoke its participants to demonstration and protest, to *manifestación* in the proper sense.

In “dheu” the earth itself gives off these same dark prayers, as body and globe are aligned in their suffering. The poem’s staggered stanzas are paired with a photograph of steam rising from manholes and crevices in the asphalt outside the Canal Street post office in New York City. The steam

hangs in a haze, obscuring nearly all of the buildings, vehicles, and people that would otherwise appear in this urban landscape. A wooden horse and the faint outline of a hazard cone indicate a construction zone. Almost as if from a wound in the ground, inflicted by the bustle of industry on the earth's surface, the steam rises upward:

**dheu**

clouds have roots?

you said

*dheu*

at the base

'to rise in a cloud'

as dust, vapor, smoke

'all notions of breath

defective perception or wits'

in Latin *fumus*

in Greek *thumos*

'soul & spirit'

the breath

of the earth

its pain

a strong smell

ahora el único lazo que nos une  
es ésa tenue nube

dice el maori

(*cloud-net* 78)

Taken together with its title, the poem opens with the question, “do [dheu] clouds have roots?” Direct address is unusual in the *cloud-net* poems, and the “you” who answers, apparently in the affirmative, is conspicuously anonymous. Perhaps we might read “dheu” as “Dieu,” and the answer to the speaker’s question as divine response. Of course, clouds do have roots in the etymological sense. “Dheu-” is the Indo-European root meaning, as the poem specifies, “to rise in a cloud,” and the basis for the Latin and Greek words for cloud, *fumus* and *thumus*, respectively (Classen 53). The etymological play in this poem points to the shared space that translation opens within and between languages. Words themselves, both in colloquial language and in the text of this poem, move as clouds, their meanings jostling among one another in complex constellations. As the poem concludes, “ahora el único lazo que nos une es ésa tenue nube,” or “now the only tie that binds us together is this tenuous cloud.” Is this tenuous cloud language itself? Etymological connection? The unspun wool? What we find, if not a dream of a common language, is one version of *manifestación*: we are “bound” by the dark crossing prayers of the sweatshop workers and the earth, caught up in a tangle of etymological play.

The mutual suffering of humankind and the earth burgeons in the language of “Sweatshop” and “dheu,” setting a clear stage for an act of resistance toward the end of *cloud-net*, but the seeds of Vicuña’s activism

were sewn early as a consequence of the Chile in which she lived. During the late 1960s in Santiago, she formed part of a group called Tribu No, or the No Tribe, dedicated in part to the cause of Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular. As part of *Quipoem*, Vicuña reproduces the foundational document for the group, simply titled, "The Non-Manifesto of the No Tribe." Perhaps not surprisingly, the most sustained aspect of the manifesto is its insistence on negation: "We manifest no desire or characteristic, we don't compose a manifesto so as not to be categorized....We disturb order with our exasperating immobility. We undermine reality from within, that's why we are subversive and kind" (*Quipoem* 135). The non-manifesto is a series of refusals, a repeated declaration of "no!". The result of this sustained refusal is an "exasperating immobility" meant to obstruct the reach of impinging systems of power. In effect the No Tribe "non-practices" an internal revolution. Their arrest of the body's movement is an inactive activism, akin to satyagraha, and promotes instead the shifting of the mind that necessarily precedes any change in actual conditions.

In the wake of Chile's own September 11, Vicuña was already in London studying art, and it was from this position of exile that she organized her political protests. As Juliet Lynd describes in "Precarious Resistance," Vicuña's raw fury at the murder of Salvador Allende is captured in the remarkable small-press book, *Saborami* (1994). Only many years after the coup was Vicuña able to return to Chile, only to find her books banned by the government and her life's work largely unknown. For Vicuña, the coup inflicted a personal, familial, and aesthetic devastation that she described vividly to me while discussing *Saborami*:

It killed a form of participatory democracy because it was threatening to the system.... I was a witness to the killing, the killing that destroyed many people in my family to this day. Some were killed and disappeared, some were tortured, and some were destroyed morally, spiritually, emotionally. Forever. The extraordinary thing was that I was twenty-four years old, and I knew, there was no mistake in my heart and body as to what that meant. So that fierceness you feel, that brutal pain, was completely alive and uncensored. ("Conversation" 10)

In *Quipoem*, "The Black Page of a Black Book" describes more than this personal loss, recalling the widespread death of a nation's poetic vision and community initiated by the coup and its preceding violence:

The coup fell like a drop of blood into the void.

If Chile had the power of collectively dreaming another possibility,

the coup interrupted that dreaming.

Of the world that had been there remained only  
a few photos, the books burned,  
the bodies disappeared. (44)

These lines are accompanied by three images. The first is a photograph documenting a *precario*, one of Vicuña's fragile art objects, made in London in 1973. From a crook of branch and twine hangs a sheer woolen fabric that has been dyed red—a bleeding flag as an offering from afar for her countrymen affected by the coup. The next two images present side by side

photographs of Chileans under the military regime. In the first photograph, a large group of adults stands in line, waiting, while two young boys play at cat's cradle in the foreground. Their smiles and unselfconscious play make a striking contrast with the drawn faces of the adults. In the second photograph, a faceless soldier aims his rifle at a man as he bends his body and reaches his hand under a chain link fence in desperation. In both photographs, weaving is present—for the children, as a game to pass the time and to protect a small space for childhood, and for the man, as a political barrier, regulating and imprisoning the body. This is the dual nature of weaving, and of the line—the web is of life and of death, and the ease with which it moves between these two roles reminds the reader of the necessity of a continually renewed resistance, and an active weaving of life.

*cloud-net*'s obstruction of the body's movement, both within the gallery and without, recalls some of Vicuña's earliest works with the No Tribe, and forms part of a larger oeuvre of spatial obstructions. In *Quipoem*, she recounts another such instance of obstruction, during which she was confronted by a man on the street:

To stop the world is to set it in motion.

The streets don't move at the same speed as I do.

"Are you personally closing the street?"

a man asked me,

"just for a while," I said (105)

To bring everything to a full stop, even for this moment, is the hitch that promises to set the world loose on a path of change. MOMA curator Laura

Hoptman reflects that *cloud-net* is “a curious net.... To walk around it, to move one’s body carefully in between the wool skeins, takes time. The *cloud-net* gives time to those caught in it” (*cloud-net* 12-13). Hoptman means that *cloud-net* gives time, paradoxically enough, by taking it, because it slows the body’s progress and exacts a careful awareness of the body’s gestures and movements. This, too, is a relation of tactile translation, and the presencing of a fully embodied mindfulness rooted, perhaps, in Vicuña’s longstanding interest in Buddhist and Taoist meditative practice (de Zegher 14).

If the ultimate goal of such meditation is nirvana—or in Vicuña’s terms, the “trans” or “trance” of ecstatic experience, a kind of transcendence-in-immanence, then *cloud-net* promises the death of the individual subject (at least insofar as she is singular), but also a birth of an other, collective mind. Because this is the arresting end toward which encumbrance in *cloud-net* ultimately reaches, Vicuña as author, shaman, teacher, singer, dancer, and weaver must come to her own stop. She must ultimately cede her authorial privilege to the others if she is to restore our powers of collective dreaming, in Chile and beyond.

The final poem in the *cloud-net* text, “Nidal de nubes” / “Cloud-Nest,” figures precisely this transference of authorship within the terms already set out in the poem “Er”:

Ellas son	These girls
las que tejen	weaving
nos otros	our
el mero hilván	undone hem



Ellas	They,
nidal	a nest

Nos otros	We,
pasar	a passing

Hilo	ready
de nube	to take

empiezo	a cloud
a tomar	thread ( <i>cloud-net</i> 80-81)

The girls weaving in this poem are undoubtedly the three dancers who joined Vicuña in the earlier poem. The responsibility of weaving falls to them, as Vicuña and others form part of an undifferentiated “We.” The Spanish “nos otros / el mero hilván” (literally, “we / a mere hem) indicates more clearly than the English that “our undone hem” not only belongs to the “We,” but is made of them. The “We” is now so much bare stuff and matter—hence a “mere,” and not just “undone” hem—and the very material with which the girls will now weave. The cloud thread that the “We” is ready to take, begins to take, is unmistakably a line heavenward, and the end of a lifeline.

As the ones now weaving, the girls are the makers of incantatory, poietic language. It is they who will the web into splitting and spreading:

Ellas son	Cloud girls
las que dicen	say

nube	let's
------	-------

hecha	split
en tres	in three

nube	let's
hecha	split
en dos	in two

blanco sobre blanco	white on white
gris sobre gris	grey on grey ( <i>cloud-net</i> 80-83)

The image figured in these lines is striking because it suggests that the web grows not by moving outward at the edges, but rather by a process of internal revolution or self-division, almost as if the bodies of the girls were cells in meiosis. The girls split in twos and in threes, scattering scraps of their language in a scintillating cloud. Before this awesome image, the poet lies down at last, struck dumb by a weaving of body and song that is distant and no longer hers:

y así	just like that
alucino	i am in wonder

viéndolas de	lying
bruces	watching

son ellas	they are
siempre	forever

luces	
jugando al	lights

cruce	
	in crossing
son ellas	
siempre	an intersection
en su gozo	girls
	trilling
trino	
	their pleasure ( <i>cloud-net</i> 82-83)

As Vicuña imagines herself looking on in distant amazement, time falls away—the girls dance in perpetuity, ensuring that the trill of their pleasure keeps dancing, their bodies weaving and unweaving from the cloud-net, a cloud-nest.

While Vicuña's poetics are not definitively limited by gender, it becomes clear in "Nidal de nubes" / "Cloud-Nest" and other poems that the legacy of *cloud-net*, its spinning and weaving against death, its movement between manifestation and manifestación, belongs primarily to women. Perhaps with the exception of some unnamed gallery workers, it is women who manifest and manipulate *cloud-net*'s poems in their multi-sensory, physical performances, as in the poem "Er," and it is women who are tangled, encumbered, and slowed toward thought in the *cloud-net* webs. No doubt this bias reflects the fact that historically, spinning and weaving have been considered women's work by most ancient cultures (Kruger 22). Vicuña reminds us that a girl inherits the ability to weave from the maternal line almost as soon as she is born, and in the strictest anatomical sense, each woman contains within her body her own womb, her own matrix, her own

cloud-net (*Quipoem* 22). It is from this “undone hem” that each woman’s vision spirals outward in material language, expanding the weave of her matrix and manifesting a new physical graft between her body and the actual world. Just as certainly as she is bound by this graft, even slowed or stopped by it, she is freed—to speak, to sing, to trill. If the work of *cloud-net* is to survive, women in New York, in Buffalo, in Houston, in Santiago de Chile, and elsewhere must continue to move and weave toward a shared, cumulative cloud-net.

With her own *cloud-net*, Cecilia Vicuña initiated cascades of “girls / trilling / their pleasure,” and through an astonishing fusion of the senses and of artistic media, gave back to writing, and in particular women’s writing, a robust voice that could be heard and more importantly, felt, despite the saturation of media in our globalized era. For her own part, Vicuña has continued to weave *cloud-net*’s dual threads of manifestation and manifestación, of a materialized poetic vision and an inactive activism rooted in encumbrance and demonstration, throughout her later work. More recent projects like *El quipu menstrual* (2006) and *Living Khipu* (2008) retain the unspun wool of the *cloud-net* matrices, but they favor a deep red dye, and draw still more explicit connections between the primal materials of wool and (menstrual) blood. Vicuña has also begun to realize the promise of the Internet and her declaration of “we will weave” from the first of *cloud-net*’s poems, through the development of an online social forum dedicated to the preservation, discussion, and sharing of oral poetries and indigenous ethics. Among its stated aims, the Oysi.org forum echoes *cloud-net*’s poetic resistance to the threats of globalization, global warming, and species loss through a vision of ethical exchange between peoples: “Oral cultures have

survived by honoring the reciprocal exchange that fuels the creative process of the cosmos. This awareness is beneficial to the life-force and sustains the cultural and biological diversity upon which life depends” (par. 3). Among the fibers of these recent works, *cloud-net* continues to emerge in a dazzling array of afterlives. Woven and unwoven, still to be woven—all of these cloud-nets break forth, “forever / lights / in crossing.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **MOUTH TO MOUTH: BARE UTTERANCE IN THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA'S *DICTEE***

m o u t h t o m o u t h / ㅏ ㅑ ㅓ ㅕ ㅗ ㅛ ㅜ ㅠ

*From the dark, a swarm of black and white, a rush of static. A mouth surfaces through the monochrome hum. The lips part, and the mouth gapes, holds steady the silent phoneme. The lips close, and the mouth recedes. Faintly, the sound of a drain swallowing, the rush of white noise. The mouth resurfaces and the lips purse. The lips grow wide. The grainy waves roll over the mouth's rounded aperture. The lips close, and the mouth recedes. Only the noise of black and white: snow. As though from afar, faintly guttering water, bird calls.*

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's short film *Mouth to Mouth* is an early, succinct statement on many of the same themes that return in her later work: translation between languages (here, English and Korean, but later, French and Japanese, as well), the interplay between aural and visual "noise," the physical exertion required to produce speech, the dissolution and loss of language and the body over time, but also the possibility of recuperation or resuscitation through a shared, mouth-to-mouth utterance. As the film moves through its cycles of the mouth's surfacing and submersion, the frames are intensely, closely focused, so that the mouth appears denatured and disembodied, displayed not as part of a face, but rather as an anatomical apparatus for speech, breath, or consumption. As in Cha's later work, the

film's dissection of the structures of the body is an attempt to view and understand the barest, most physical origins of utterance through the lens of anatomy (though in subsequent works, Cha weighs the whole body's role in producing speech, rather than only that of the lips, teeth, and tongue).

The roll of the grainy snow, over the mouth, inside the mouth, and back outward, provides an anxious reminder of the mouth's situation at the dividing line between inner and outer surfaces of the body. With each cycle of emergence and submersion, the film's visual and aural noises wax and wane in intensity, dissolving the form of the mouth and supplanting the Korean vowel sounds that appear silently on screen. The viewer tenses in anticipation of each new emergence of the mouth, and a certain anxiety arises each time the mouth begins to recede again. Throughout the cycles of movement, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine whether the mouth on screen is speaking, breathing, or drowning. Accompanying sounds of draining and running water cut in, underscoring the watery motion of the visual noise and the viewer's apprehension that the mouth—and the absent body—may be drowning in the black and white snow.

In the context of drowning, the title of the film gains particular resonance, and suggests the possibility that a "mouth to mouth resuscitation" might occur. While the film does not show the mouth revived on screen, it challenges the viewer with a number of pressing considerations. Whether or not "mouth to mouth" refers to a first aid procedure or some other kind of connection, the phrase depends on the presence of two mouths, with some form of transfer between them, though the film leaves the mechanism of this exchange undefined. Are the two mouths those of the viewer and the body absent from the screen, or some other pairing? Should the second mouth

merely mimic the first, as in a mirror image or language lesson, or should the second mouth actually make contact with the first, as in mouth-to-mouth resuscitation? If the latter is the case, how might the medium of film permit the physical, bodily contact necessary for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation? Once some form of connection is established between the two mouths, what is it precisely that travels between them? These are questions one might reasonably ask not only of *Mouth to Mouth*, but also of the present subject of this chapter, *Dictee*.

At the time *Mouth to Mouth* was filmed in 1975, Cha was a still student at Berkeley, and her fledgling works as an avant-garde filmmaker, performance artist, and poet were known only to a limited audience. In the years that followed, her body of work grew substantially to include a number of artist's books, films and performances in the San Francisco Bay area, an edited volume of essays on film, *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus* (Tanam 1980), as well as an unfinished film project to be shot in Korea, *White Dust from Mongolia*, for which Cha was awarded a postdoctoral fellowship and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1982 Tanam Press published the now canonical cross-genre, multi-media book *Dictee*, when Cha was still an emerging young poet and largely unrecognized by most critics of literature. As is by now well known, Cha was murdered and her career cut short just days after the publication of *Dictee*, as she was preparing work for an exhibition at the Artists Space in SoHo. Her untimely death saw the reception of her work flag until the publication of *Writing Self, Writing Nation* (1994), a collection of critical essays edited by Elaine H. Kim dedicated to *Dictee*. Kim's volume canonized the text as a work of Korean American literature and marked the beginning of sustained critical interest in



Cha's life and work, as both a Korean American woman writer and an avant-garde phenom.

Without question, *Dictee* is a remarkable text, with sufficient formal and thematic complexity to support a wide-ranging variety of critical approaches. Despite its startlingly heterogeneous visual surface, *Dictee* is neatly subdivided into a prelude, nine main chapters, and a sort of postlude. Each of the main chapters—with one significant exception—is named for one of the nine Greek muses from Hesiod's "Theogony": Clio / History, Calliope / Epic Poetry, Urania / Astronomy, Melpomene / Tragedy, Erato / Love Poetry, Elitere / Lyric Poetry, Thalia / Comedy, Terpsichore / Choral Dance, and Polymnia / Sacred Poetry. In this list, "Elitere" is conspicuous, for there is not a Hesiodic muse by that name, and lyric poetry usually belongs to "Erato." Instead Cha has substituted a muse of her own invention, displacing "Euterpe" and music from the collective, and demonstrating very early on her willingness to revise and depart from the original Greek model.

Within the regular subdivisions of *Dictee*'s framework, more forms of invention are to be found, and visual and textual collage abound. Cha reproduces not only prose and verse, but also maps, anatomical diagrams, translation exercises in French and English, catechism and scripture, transcriptions of personal letters and political entreaties, handwritten letters, drafts in manuscript of the poems included in *Dictee*, film stills, as well as photographs of historical figures, family members, landscapes, and graffiti texts. With the collage of these textual and visual materials comes a series of intersecting, densely layered narratives: 1) Cha's autobiographical account of her search through memories and historical documents for her place in relation to her mother, mother tongue, and mother land; 2) the speaker's

search for other female figures—both historical and mythological—through whose voices, histories, and bodies she might speak for herself, resisting normative gender roles and opposing official histories produced by colonial powers; 3) an exploration of the physical exertion and practice necessary to transform the body at the moment of language acquisition and utterance; 4) dictation exercises that are suggestive of the ways a language can convey and impose on its subjects the religious, cultural, and political values of a colonial nation (in the case of *Dictee*, the language and nation are alternately French and France, English and the United States, and Japanese and Japan); and 5) the history of Japan's occupation of Korea, and in particular the Koreans' resistance, martyrdom, exile, and subsequent formation of a diaspora to which the author herself belonged.

Like the other books in this study, *Dictee*'s ultimate project is the almost alchemical dream of the word made flesh: its pages develop the possibility of the word rendered into a tactile, material form, with a weight, body, and consequence of its own, and provide a model for the production and transfer of materialized language from one mouth to another, and from one body to another. For Cha, the materialization and exchange of language between speakers and readers produces linguistic forms sufficiently obdurate to oppose official cultural memories and colonial histories. The scenes in *Dictee* detailing the acquisition of language through dictation exercises and the descriptions of the physical transformations necessary for utterance are not merely critiques of the Japanese colonization of occupied Korea; rather, these scenes instruct, and to some extent enact, the poïetic process whereby a speaker or reader constitutes her subjecthood, body, and voice together in a bare, material utterance. Once manifest, her materialized language

possesses the physical form and the duration necessary to seed other women's utterances. In Cha's formulation, the original speaker's language must enter into a collective tissue of utterance that suffuses all time, space, and bodies, thus reconstituting History with the full plentitude of suppressed voices and marginalized narratives. It is only through the reconstitution of History, its expansion to contain and relay the narratives of "others" (Cha's "others" are her muses, both historical and autobiographical) that its subjects can access a kind of omnipresent Truth that stands outside all time, space, and human understanding.

### **The Utter**

*May I write words more naked than flesh,  
stronger than bone, more resilient than  
sinew, sensitive than nerve.*

*Sappho (Dictee iii)*

As happens in *The Midnight* and *cloud-net*, *Dictee* opens with a substantial amount of front matter before turning to its first chapter, "Clio / History." These prefatory materials are arguably among *Dictee*'s most important passages, for they provide the necessary conditions and critical apparatus for reading the remainder of the text. The lengthy sequence comprises a number of strange textual bedfellows, as though it were a microcosm of the book at large: a black and white photograph of a barren landscape, except for some conspicuous pyramidal ruins; a black and white photograph of writing in

hangul, a Korean script; the title and copyright pages; Cha's dedication of *Dictee* ("to my mother to my father"); a brief epigraph attributed to Sappho; a list of Cha's nine muses; a pair of untitled French and English prose paragraphs; a passage of prose poetry entitled "Disease"; two invocations of the muse, with notable differences between them; a translation exercise from English to French, akin to what one might find in a foreign language textbook; a passage of prose poetry recounting a narrative surrounding Christian ritual and Ash Wednesday (as well as another set of English to French translation exercises); a short, untitled list poem; and a brief, almost concrete poem with the lines "IN NOMINE / LE NOM / NOMINE." What emerges from this conspicuous interweaving of materials is Cha's particular take on tactual poïesis, a poïesis that the speaker of her poem initiates, but that the willing reader must complete.

Cha's attribution of the epigraph's lines "May I write words more naked than flesh, / stronger than bone, more resilient than / sinew, sensitive than nerve" to the Ancient Greek poet Sappho has sent more than one scholar on a frantic search through the limited canon of Sapphic fragments. To date, no scholar has succeeded in identifying any of Sappho's poems that would form even an approximate source for Cha's epigraph<sup>5</sup>. In her chapter from *Writing Self Writing Nation*, "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*," Shelley Sunn Wong notes that the epigraph attributed to Sappho has in fact

---

<sup>5</sup> In an informal exchange on the Buffalo Poetics e-mail list, Walter K. Lew writes, "in 1991, I spent days trying to track down a Sappho fragment that might even begin to resemble the 'quotation' and couldn't find anything." Lew asserts that he included this research in a lecture he delivered at Cornell University, where an undergraduate student subsequently passed the discovery along—unattributed—to Shelley Wong. Questions of primary attribution aside, a simple Internet search reveals that Cha's epigraph has been taken at face value by a sufficient number of readers, and that the epigraph has now become to some extent naturalized and grafted onto the existing body of Sappho's work.

been penned by Cha herself (137). For Wong, Sappho represents the tenth muse (as she has been called by Plato) to Cha's other muses, and the figure through which *Dictee* works "to undermine some of the presumptions of the epic" (116). For Wong and others, Sappho's presence in the text—however constructed and contrived—disrupts the epic's status as elite, "high" literature and underscores the subtlety and inventiveness with which Cha resists the epic as the Western, male-centered genre par excellence (117).

In "Revising Hesiod, Revisioning Korea: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* as a Subversive Hesiodic Catalogue of Women," Kung Jong Lee follows Wong's lead and draws a productive connection between Cha's epigraph and Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*:

Cha's comparison of words to the flesh, bone, sinew, and nerve curiously reminds one of Hélène Cixous' 1975 call to write woman's body: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (1997, 350). Indeed, the writing style of *Dictee*—nonlinear, cyclical, nonprogressive, multilayered, multivocal, experimental, fluid, open, fragmented, and surreal—is strikingly similar to that of *l'écriture féminine* formulated and practiced by Cixous and other French feminist writers.... In Western literary tradition, one of the first women writers who put women into the text, world, and history was Sappho. Sappho expressed a peculiarly feminine sensibility in her lyrics on herself, women, and female bonding.... Cha also manifests her feminist position by identifying with Sappho: she writes the epigraph herself and attributes it to the Greek poet. (77-8)

While the comparison between Cha's epigraph and *écriture féminine* seems apt to a certain extent, Lee draws the connection largely in passing, and it is worth noting the continuities as well as the discrepancies between the attitudes of Cixous' essay and Cha's text. Lee's characterization of *Dictee*'s styling ("nonlinear," "multilayered") is perfectly precise, and yet, the place of the female body within Cha's text does not fully align with the French feminist tradition. That the female body is written into *Dictee* is not so much in the service of the body itself, or its visibility (in the sense of a gender politics), so much as the body's presence is a necessary given for the production of speech. If the body is written about or upon in *Dictee*, this inscription serves largely to instruct the reader in the necessary configuration of the body's parts in order to perform the functions of dictation and utterance.

The vision of language that the epigraph imagines is indeed curious, and likely beyond anything Cixous had in mind for *écriture féminine*, for what indeed would words more naked, stronger, more resilient, and more sensitive than flesh, bone, sinew, and nerve look and feel like? If the epigraph is to be taken at face value, then the condition to which language aspires in *Dictee* is not merely bodily, but super-bodily: the epigraph imagines a language capable of transcending the bodily limits of the individual speaker, paradoxically, by becoming even more bodily still—a curious transcendence of the flesh through condensation and super-saturation of flesh.

Lee also claims that Cha's attribution of the epigraph to Sappho is an act of identification, but this argument seems troubled by the fact that no words belonging to Sappho, except perhaps her name, appear in Cha's text. Only the indicators of Sappho's absence—her fabricated words and her missing body—have been written into *Dictee*. Is "identification" really the

most appropriate term to describe the way in which Cha has eclipsed the Greek poet with her own words? What is the difference between identification and appropriation, or between identification and a masked performance, or between identification and colonization? That Cha assumes the identity and the voice of one of her poetic predecessors in writing a book that has been widely characterized as an anti-colonial text throws into doubt whether aesthetic appropriation (or even colonization) is equivalent to the linguistic, cultural, economic, and political occupations that occur when one nation occupies another sovereign state.

“Disease,” the first section of prose poetry in *Dictee*, sheds some light on Cha’s attempt to resist linguistic, cultural, economic, and political colonization through, paradoxically enough, an aesthetic appropriation or colonization of herself and her historical female predecessors. Like the film *Mouth to Mouth*, “Disease” is conspicuously occupied with the body as the site of linguistic production, and like the film, the text evokes the speaker’s physical transformations toward utterance in painstaking detail. The first task to which the body must align its parts, evidently, is that of mimicry:

She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech.

(Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words. Since she hesitates to measure the accuracy, she resorts to mimicking gestures with the mouth. The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back to its original place. She would then gather both lips and protrude them in a pout that might utter some thing.

(One thing. Just one.) But the breath falls away. With a slight tilting of her head backwards, she would gather the strength in her shoulders and remain in this position (*Dictee* 3)

If the physicality and tactility of utterance were ever in doubt (or perhaps more likely, merely unacknowledged), Cha renders the movements of the body as it arranges and touches itself with a level of description rivaling the detail of the close-up frames in *Mouth to Mouth*. Later in *Dictee*, Cha emphasizes the importance of the anatomical structures of the body (and particularly those apparatuses that produce speech) through two reproductions of medical diagrams of the body: one, an acupuncture chart, and the other, a multiple, sectional view of the head, mouth, throat, and respiratory system taken from a Western textbook. More so than its Western equivalent, the acupuncture chart visualizes its language by mapping it onto and into the body, such that language itself becomes not just a symbolic signifier, but also a kind of physical matter.

This initial view of the body in “Disease” mirrors the careful, deliberate dissection of all the body’s organs of speech in each of the anatomical diagrams. As the descriptive language creeps outward from the mouth, it encompasses the speaker’s head, and then her shoulders, until gradually the whole body appears tensed in preparation for the first moment of utterance. At this early stage of the speaker’s emergence, sound and the body have been broken down into a loose arrangement of raw materials and parts: a “bared noise,” “groan,” or “bits torn from words,” these scraps are nearly the equivalent of the black and white noise, the snow, of *Mouth to Mouth*. Not coincidentally, this is one of the earliest moments in *Dictee* in which the dual senses of “utter” come into play. It appears that for Cha, there is an implicit connection between the adjectival and nominal forms of “utter”: in order for the Disease to produce her utterance, the text must follow through—and therefore, writer, reader, and Disease must follow through—with the



meticulously detailed ritual of weighing the body and words in their barest and most utterly material forms.

Typographically Cha's prose passages differentiate between the space of an external, actual world (set in regular Roman type) and a second, interior world (indicated through italicized, indented paragraphs). Within this internal space, a second struggle is ongoing—it is no longer a question of physical utterance, but of the psychic wound around which the speaking subject gathers and forms herself:

*It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say.*

*Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festers inside. The wound, the liquid, the dust. Must break. Must void (Dictee 3)*

Here Cha postulates the “wound, the liquid, the dust” as something like the kernel of subjectivity. The urge toward utterance appears less a question of agency than of balances: at this particular moment in the speaker's emergence, the pain of silence weighs less heavy than the pain of speech, and so the “it”—that indefinable thing to be said and tenuous seed of the self, remains unspoken. The final lines of the passage—“Must break. Must void”—indicate precisely how tenuous this silence is, as though the wound threatens at any moment to break forth and speak itself.

In the external realm—the realm of the physical body and its transformations—the pronoun “she” returns from its conspicuous absence in the preceding italicized passage. As the interior festers and burgeons with an invisible wound, the pressure mounts from within and forces the body to prepare itself for the physical exertion of speech:

From the back of her neck she releases her shoulders free. She swallows once more. (Once more. One more time would do.) In preparation. It augments. To such a pitch. Endless drone, refueling itself. Autonomous. Self-generating. Swallows with the last efforts last wills against the pain that wishes it to speak.

*(Dictee 3)*

For the first time in “Disease,” the pronoun “she” appears in the same passage of prose as the pronoun “it”—these lines appear to represent the first moment that the body of the speaker and the unspeakable wound interact. Their relation is largely one of opposition: the body prepares itself to speak, but fails repeatedly, and Disease even calculates in her asides how much preparation will be sufficient to release the pressure and achieve speech: “(One more. One more time would do.)” That these asides register Disease’s interior monologue assures the reader that “It,” whatever it may signify and from wherever it initially originates, is decidedly not part of Disease’s consciousness. Rather, the indefinite pronoun seems to signal something far more alien—something, in fact, to be resisted. “It” is an unrelenting force that feeds and propels itself onward. Hence “It” is described as “Autonomous. Self-generating,” though to be sure, these terms apply just as equally to the Disease’s emergence into language as they do to the wound that murmurs within her. It is not difficult to understand the emergence of utterance in “Disease” in terms of labor and birth, but it is an unusual delivery, as though the speaker were giving birth to herself—that is, to her own selfhood.

Immediately following her “last efforts... against the pain that wishes it to speak,” Disease swallows, opening a scene of influx and penetration en

masse from a horde of “others.” Tellingly, the moment Disease “allows others,” the sentences become a series of stutters and the pronoun “she” vanishes, even from those sentences in which the syntax seems to imply the persistence of the absent subject:

She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full.  
Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen. The others  
each occupying her. Tumorous layers, expel all excesses until in  
all cavities she is flesh. (*Dictée* 3-4)

The action portrayed in this scene can only be described as invasive and violent. Her swallow admits a continuous wave of others who penetrate, fill, and concentrate in every vacant space within her body, until the density of matter achieved verges on something grotesque, something “tumorous.” The image evoked is of the body saturated beyond capacity; it is an image that recalls the epigraph and its invocation of words more bodily than the body, more naked, stronger, more resilient, and more sensitive than flesh, bone, sinew, and nerve.

Just at the moment when the supersaturation of the body is at its utmost (“until in all cavities she is flesh”), the personal pronoun returns and carries over into the next stage of the speaker’s development. Here the sentences begin in a markedly more fluid manner:

She allows herself caught in their threading, anonymously in  
their thick motion in the weight of their utterance. When the  
amplification stops there might be an echo. She might make the  
attempt then. The echo part. At the pause. When the pause has  
already soon begun and has rested there still. She waits inside  
the pause. Inside her. Now. This very moment. Now. She takes

the air rapidly, in gulfs, in preparation for the distances to come.

The pause ends. The voice wraps another layer. Thicker now even. From the waiting. The wait from pain to say. To not to.

Say. (*Dictee* 4)

A tonal shift develops in this passage—a subtle softening—as the imagery moves away from the imagery of the horde. Instead these lines posit Disease’s encounter with the “others” as something possibly less sinister: a threading, or weaving. The imagery of the invasive swarm and the tumor gives way, and the speaker finds herself enmeshed in the dense, thick weaving of the others. Following Vicuña’s woven skeins of wool in *cloud-net*, it is tempting to read the threading in *Dictee* not as a swarm, but as a kind of matrix or womb, and the others not a marauding alien force, but, just possibly, kindred voices. In this instance, it is critical that the reader take notice of the fact that both this passage and the previous paragraph begin with the phrase “She allows” (in which we hear the echo of “she allows”), dispelling somewhat any apprehension that the speaker’s agency or willingness has been compromised by her interaction with the others. What follows from these and subsequent passages, then, is not exclusively (or even primarily) a scene of resistance against some foreign colonizing force, but rather a negotiation between the undefined wound within Disease and the presence of the others—the other speakers whose languages, cultures, and histories she opens herself up to in order to form a hybridized voice of her own. What becomes necessary throughout the process of this negotiation is the creation of a third, interstitial space, or what Cha calls elsewhere “*Tertium Quid*”—Disease must be neither herself nor the others, not the silent wound, and not merely the dense swarm of others.

At least in this early stage of her development, the two vessels Disease identifies as potential third spaces for her emergence are the echo, and in the italicized passage that follows, punctuation:

*She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become, herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air. Give her. Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver*

She relays the others. Recitation. Evocation. Offering.

Provocation. The begging. Before her. Before them. (*Dictee 4*)

As potential spaces of emergence, the echo and punctuation are, paradoxically enough, precisely no-places: the echo, a sound and form like utterance, but without distinctive meaning and secondary to an authoritative original; or else punctuation, an immaterial mark that merely divides one thing from another, or else shifts a sentence's mode or affective register. These are the most liminal of sites, just sufficiently vacant to allow the speaker space enough for her voice to emerge alongside, as well as in, of, and through the voices of others.

In the last several movements of "Disease," the speaker seems to have fully realized herself as an apparatus for conveying the voices of the others. Her body becomes not unlike a switchboard, and she an operator. Or to posit another metaphor, the relay seems not merely that of a message delivered over a channel, but more like a relay race, one runner handing off to another: "Hand it. Deliver it." As the final moment of delivery approaches, the body submits to the pressure and weight that can no longer be contained within.

The skull itself expands and presses outward against the skin, and the contraction and delivery begin:

Now the weight begins from the uppermost back of her head, pressing downward. It stretches evenly, the entire skull expanding tightly all sides toward the front of her head. She gasps from its pressure, its contracting motion.

*Inside her voids. It does not contain further. Rising from the empty below, pebble lumps of gas. Moisture. Begin to flood her. Dissolving her. Slow, slowed to deliberation.*

*Slow and thick. (Dictee 4-5)*

The saturation of others within the body of Disease seems to rise and disperse through her, filling every crevice and irradiating all of the cells in her body until the bonds between them begin to uncouple and disintegrate.

As Disease moves from a supersaturation of others within her interior toward a complete suffusion and dissolution of the body's parts, she is ultimately turned completely inside-out, inverted and exploded into the world:

The above traces from her head moving downward closing her eyes, in the same motion, slower parting her mouth open together with her jaw and throat which the above falls falling just to the end not stopping there but turning her inside out in the same motion, shifting complete the whole weight to elevate upward.

Begins imperceptibly, near perceptible. (Just once. Just one time and it will take.) She takes. She takes the pause. Slowly. From the thick. The thickness. From weighted motion upwards.

Slowed. To deliberation even when it passed upward through her mouth again. The delivery. She takes it. Slow. The invoking. All the time now. All the time there is. Always. And all times. The pause. Uttering. Hers now. Hers bare. The utter. (*Dictee* 5)

What is remarkable about the final paragraph in particular is that it appears to have skipped a beat in time: a physical transformation of miraculous proportions has taken place throughout all the preceding paragraphs, and yet here the Disease is present again and attempting the utter, almost as if the entire event had never happened. As she takes the pause now, something seems to have ruptured in time itself—everything has come to slowness, deliberation, and thickness. What has been delivered, it appears, is a different temporal order altogether: “All the time now. All the time there is. Always. And all times. The pause. Uttering.” The explosion from within Disease has echoed outward in shockwaves, so that everywhere is now the pause, the third space of the *Tertium Quid*, and all times and all histories exist together in the present. The word made more fleshly than flesh has led to a transcendence of bodily, material, and temporal limits, opening a continuous and all inclusive present. The Disease is in the relational space of Howe’s interleaf, in the interstitial, poietic space of Vicuña’s trans—and thence *Dictee*, and dictation, begins.

The evocation of utterance in “Disease” has been widely received by its readers as a critique of the imposition of language upon an unwilling colonized subject. The initial scenes of encounter with the others do evoke the violence of their swarming penetration and occupation of the body, and later translation exercises in *Dictee* demonstrate the way that language instruction serves to indoctrinate students into more than just the language of

a given nation. Shelley Wong understands “Disease” primarily as an example of resistance against such indoctrination: “It is the disease who throughout the text will utter and re-utter the religious, colonial and patriarchal discourses that threaten to prescribe and proscribe all possibilities of speech for the Korean American immigrant woman. The disease is fundamentally disruptive: ‘She mimicks [sic] the speaking’ of authoritarian discourses, a mimicking ‘[t]hat might resemble speech’ (3) but which does not quite reproduce the original. Her method always seems to be that of unfaithful translation” (121). While Wong’s characterization of the others’ language in *Dictee* is by no means unfounded, neither is it complete, for most passages in *Dictee* contain multiple narratives at once. Disease’s stuttered speech may well be the result of a disobedient, unfaithful narrator, but the stutter seems just as likely a mimetic marker of the physical difficulty of producing speech. Cha carefully unsettles the question of agency in these passages in order to produce a multiplicity of possible readings. While the “others” that the Disease allows, contains, and delivers might be those “religious, colonial and patriarchal discourses,” they seem every bit as likely to be the voices of other women—specifically, the voices of Cha’s nine (or ten) muses. “Disease” is also, if not primarily, an evocation of the invocation of the muses, and Cha’s distillation of what happens when the speaker’s call for inspiration has been answered.

### ***Two Muses***

*Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound.*

*The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same*



*folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To  
extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the  
image another word another image the reply that will not repeat  
history in oblivion. (Dictee 33)*

Of all the muses that the Disease relays in *Dictee*, Yu Guan Soon, the young Korean revolutionary and martyr, and Hyung Soon Huo, Cha's own mother, are the figures most clearly and most centrally defined. Through these two muses in particular, *Dictee* seeks to resurrect a set of parallel narratives: that of the mother land and that of the mother. In the first section of *Dictee*, "Clio / History," Cha develops a discontinuous biographical sketch for Yu Guan Soon through a collage of prose passages, as well as reproduced letters and photographs. The predominant concern of this first chapter, however—beyond the detailing of Yu Guan Soon's life in particular and her resistance to the Japanese occupation of Korea—is the question of resisting and revising the totality of History, and in particular, Cha's search for a kind of writing with the requisite form and endurance to rescue certain narratives like Guan Soon's from the margins of history.

"Clio" provides a more explicit gloss of the processes of utterance described in the "Disease" prose passages. In both sections of *Dictee*, the poetic project is the ultimately the same: to create through the utterance of language more material, more fleshly than flesh, enduring connections and resurrections of absent female figures, both genealogical and historical. In narrating the details of Guan Soon's life, Cha is particularly attentive to the facts of her familial lineage:

Guan Soon is the only daughter born of four children to her patriot father and mother. From an early age her actions are marked exceptional. History records the biography of her short and intensely-lived experience. Actions prescribed separate her path from the others. The identity of such a path is exchangeable with any other heroine in history, their names, dates, actions which require not definition in their devotion to generosity and self-sacrifice. (*Dictee* 30)

At the same time that these lines assure the reader of Guan Soon's (patriotic) pedigree, the passage also gestures away from her particular identity, insisting that the revolutionary path that she follows—her movement through history—is not, in point of fact, particular to her. Implicit in this claim is the foundation for Cha's project of resurrection, for what first develops in "Disease," and later all throughout *Dictee*, is the possibility of one speaker's body allowing and relaying the histories of others. If Guan Soon's path is "exchangeable with any other heroine in history," then her narrative is also one that can be absorbed and reproduced by another speaker, Disease, provided only that the two figures' "devotion to generosity and self-sacrifice" remains unchanged.

Guan Soon is also of interest for Cha because the way her narrative has been preserved in the historical record provides a precedent for how the fleeting details of one ephemeral life might take on the kind of obdurate persistence *Dictee* seeks, once the life has been retold through the obsessive cycle of History's narration. In spite of the appeal that this duration holds for Cha, the mythologizing of an actual, biographical self also poses the problem of accuracy:

She makes complete her duration. As others have made  
complete theirs: rendered incessant, obsessive myth, rendered  
immortal their acts without the leisure to examine whether the  
parts false the parts real according to History's revision.

*Truth embraces with it all other abstentions than itself.  
Outside time. Outside space. Parallels other durations,  
oblivious to the deliberate brilliance of its own time,  
mortal, deliberate marking. Oblivious to itself. But to sing.  
To sing to. Very softly.*

She calls the name Jeanne d'Arc three times.

She calls the name Ahn Joong Kun five times. (*Dictée 28*)

Here the italicized passage suggests an implicit tension between "History's revision," which is little more than an imperfect constructed narrative of events, and "Truth," an apparently absolute and total condition that stands outside all time and all space—and certainly outside of human reason. One might go so far as to posit Guan Soon as an ephemeral instantiation of this Truth: she "makes complete her duration... [a]s others have made complete theirs," just as "Truth... [p]arallels other durations, oblivious to the brilliance of its own time, mortal, deliberate marking." It appears that access to this Truth, through Guan Soon and others, may be achieved through the act of singing ("But to sing. To sing to. Very softly") or else through other rituals of language. The invocation of the names of other national martyrs—Jeanne D'Arc and Ahn Joong Kun—has the effect of an incantation, as though through the repetition of the name itself, the sound of those names rumbling through the body of the speaker, the fallen martyrs might return.

In spite of the faith the previous passage seems to place in the invocation of the name, other words seem less stable and certainly less directly linked to the complete history of Truth. The name is an extraordinary kind of language, whereas more ordinary forms risk becoming the servants of the colonizing nation rather than the colonized:

Japan has become the sign. The alphabet. The vocabulary. To *this* enemy people. The meaning is the instrument, memory that pricks the skin, stabs the flesh, the volume of blood, the physical substance blood as measure, that rests as record, as document. Of *this* enemy people.

To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know.

Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History's recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another. Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions, for this experience, for this outcome, that does not cease to continue. (*Dictée 32*)

This passage casts into serious doubt the accuracy with which both History and conventional, representational language can convey the grave atrocities perpetuated against the Koreans in the name of Japanese colonialism. Logically enough, the problem with the signifier is that it is not physical, not bodily enough to contain the suffering caused by one nation's disregard for

“the humanity of another.” If ever there were an *ars poetica* in *Dictee*, it is surely to be located in the final lines of this passage, for here is the critical motivation behind all of Cha’s tactile and visual innovations in poetic form: the need for a visceral impact on the reader—whether the reader is another sovereign nation and potential ally for the Korean resistance, or simply a reader of *Dictee*—initiates the poet’s search for that super-bodily, utterly material language that can break open and rewrite the text of History. “Clio” ultimately asserts that it is necessary to intervene in History and to invent language anew, if only not to repeat History’s vagaries blindly: “To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion” (33).

With respect to *Dictee*’s edict not to repeat history in oblivion in “Clio / History,” “Calliope / Epic Poetry” offers a curious counter-narrative in which the aim seems precisely to repeat history, although the history here is a personal history, and perhaps the repetition is not made not in oblivion. The passages of prose in “Calliope / Epic Poetry” are also unusual because they are written as a direct address in Cha’s voice to her mother, Hyung Soon Huo (and through her, Cha’s maternal line), who was still living at the time *Dictee* was written:

You take the train home. Mother... you call her already, from the gate. You cannot wait. She leaves everything to greet you, she comes and takes you indoors and brings you food to eat. You are home now your mother our home. Mother inseparable from which is her identity, her presence. Longing to breathe the same air her hand no more a hand than instrument broken weathered no death takes them. No death will take them, Mother, I dream

you just to be able to see you. Heaven falls nearer in sleep.

Mother, my first sound. The first utter. The first concept. (*Dictée* 49-50)

Much as “Clio” discourages the reader from historical repetitions, it becomes clear that in these lines—and perhaps in the case of personal history—the problem of repetition is not quite as pressing. Indeed, what is now at stake in Cha’s textual repetitions seems rather like the process by which Susan Howe sought to return her mother, Mary Manning, to her in *The Midnight*. In Cha’s case, “Calliope” is a conflation of narratives from her mother’s life and well as her own, but the combined narrative is still strikingly similar to Howe’s account of insomnia: Cha describes the states of dreaming and of sleeping as spaces in which she might encounter her mother. The longing Cha expresses for her mother and the maternal line is all the more urgent, not only because of the succor she offers (“takes you indoors and brings you food to eat”), but because she appears to be one of the few figures for whom signifier and signified, identity and presence are inexorably one: “Mother inseparable from which is her identity, her presence.” Thus the mother promises a stability of language that is not to be found in History.

The mother is also the origin of utterance, *sine qua non*: “Mother, my first sound. The first utter. The first concept.” To call forth the mother, therefore, is to reclaim the power of utterance, and as before in “Disease,” to give birth to the speaker’s own selfhood. As the interaction between mother and daughter in “Calliope” develops, the language echoes an earlier scene in “Disease,” in which the speaker first seizes upon the marks of punctuation and pauses as the space through which she will make her utterance:

You are moving inside. Inside the stillness. Its slowness makes almost imperceptible the movement. Pauses. Pauses hardly rest. New movement, ending only to extend into the new movement.... You are being moved. You are movement. Inseparably. (*Dictee* 51)

In this later passage, the interstitial space of the pause has become an afterlife in which the mother continues to dwell—as though the afterlife were absorbed within the body of the speaker, the mother moving within her own daughter’s womb. This curious reversals of roles and of time seems apt, given the nature of delivering the voices of others through of utterance.

As Cha writes to her mother (the narrative suggests she writes to her mother while in Korea), she tells her mother of her ability to call her forth into presence by sheer will of words:

I write. I write you. Daily. From here. If I am not writing, I am thinking about writing. I am composing. Recording movements. You are here I raise the voice. Particle bits of sound and noise gathered pick up lint, dust. They might scatter and become invisible. Speech morsels. Broken chips of stones. (*Dictee* 56)

In another echo of the earlier images from “Disease,” here Cha begins the process of accreting the bare, utter materials of speech—“bits of sound and noise”—until sufficient matter has gathered to produce an utterance. Not unlike one star drawing mass from an adjacent star, the bits of sound and noise begin to “pick up lint, dust,” the lowliest of matter, and begin to gather mass unto themselves. What seems different from the earlier scene of utterance in *Dictee*, however, is that before the bits of sound, noise, lint, and

dust achieve the critical mass necessary to explode forth from the speaker in a singular utterance, they “scatter and become invisible.”

In “Calliope,” the shift in focus toward a dispersed utterance of little more than “chips of stone” suggests that the power of utterance must not lie solely with the Diseuse or any other single speaker. Rather, as “each fragment by each fragment” has been extracted from the visual and verbal documents of history, the body of the speaker must digest and process these bare materials only to “scatter them”—almost like seeds, almost like shrapnel, in order that they will take root in the bodies of other potential speakers. As the passages in *Dictee*’s final section move toward their conclusion, the photograph at the very beginning of book, which shows a stand of pyramidal ruins amid an otherwise vacant wasteland, returns to the reader with its reminder of time’s toll on even the most steadfast of material structures:

Words cast each by each to weather  
avowed indisputably, to time.

If it should impress, make fossil trace of word,  
residue of word, stand as ruin stands,  
simply, as mark

having relinquished itself to time and distance (*Dictee* 177)

With this brief set of lines just before the book “makes complete” its duration, Cha provides the first of three conclusions to the narrative threads woven throughout its pages. Here we learn the fate of language—now that the scattered words have been dispersed and passed on to other readers and speakers, the poem makes clear that the “chips of stone” are not only seeds,



but ruins, “fossil trace[s]” of words—until at last, *Dictee* closes with a final a vision of the fate of the original speaker and of the muses.

For the speaker, the complete disruption of temporal limits between the present and the past, and the opening of History to the plenitude of histories supplied by Truth, has led to a final moment of return. The child finds herself in the arms of her mother again, and calls to her to be held up to a window:

Lift me up mom to the window the child looking above too high  
above her view the glass between some image a blur now darks  
and greys mere shadows lingering above her vision her head  
tilted as far back as it can go. Lift me up to the window the  
white frame and the glass between, early dusk or dawn when  
light is muted, houses cast shadow pools in the passing light.  
Brief. All briefly towards night.... Trees adhere to silence in  
attendance to the view to come. If to occur.... Lift me to the  
window to the picture image unleash the ropes tied to the  
weights of stones first the ropes then its scraping on the wood  
to break stillness as the bells fall peal follow the sound of ropes  
holding weight scraping on wood to break stillness bells fall a  
peal to sky. (*Dictee* 179)

Perplexing as this final scene may be, it appears that the daughter-speaker of *Dictee* has turned to a time of perpetual twilight—though whether it is dusk or dawn remains in question. Lingering in this ambiguous space between day and night, dark and light, the daughter has finally ceded the last of her material words to the winds, “to weather,” to “time and distance,” or to other readers, and she is shorn of her earthly embodiment. In this perpetual space

of childhood, there is finally no vision and no touch, only the peal of a bell, an appeal to the sky—for what, we are left to wonder.

On the following page, a single, square image, almost an exact mirror of the window-frame pass of prose, shows a group of nine Korean women, their arms linked over each other's shoulders in a self-evident display of sisterhood. Among them, as though among the other muses, and finally at rest, is Yu Guan Soon. She has made complete her duration once more, and her photograph, once an excerpted fragment from this final group photo, has come to rest among the others.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CODA

In ways perhaps still unrecognized, the works of Susan Howe, Cecilia Vicuña, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha have broken ground for other artists and writers to begin a serious exploration of the possibilities and limits of tactile poetics. In some respects, the motivation that drives poets toward tactual poïesis is nothing new in poetry. The dream of a poem that does something, that makes something happen in the world, lies at the very heart of what so many poets have attempted to do in their works. As an emergent genre, tactile poetics continues to take up the question of touch, and not merely vision, in a variety of forms, some of them more codified, and some of them just beginning to exist. Though this present discussion only briefly addresses select works by Anne Carson, Anne Hamilton, and Pamela Z, it is most certainly the case that these parts have been left unjustly to stand for the whole. Anne Carson's *Nox* takes on many of the formal features and innovations that Cha, Vicuña, and especially Howe developed through tactual poïesis, but *Nox* reforms these strategies into one of the first visual-tactile books of poetry to enjoy relative commercial success. In *myein*, Anne Hamilton explores the possibility of tactual poïesis from the perspective of an installation artist working with texts, rather than as a poet working with visual and tactile materials. Finally, in the work of Pamela Z, tactual poïesis begins a necessary process of evolution and intersection with the digital technologies that have so recently begun to emerge in literature and the arts, as well as in everyday life.

## **Nox**

Published to critical acclaim and a relatively wide readership in 2010, Anne Carson's *Nox* has been lauded for its innovation and sensual appeal as a "book in a box." More precisely, *Nox* is a facsimile reproduction of a handcrafted book Carson fabricated following the death of her brother Michael in 2000. Included in Carson's multi-media elegy are dictionary definitions, family photographs, color illustrations by the poet, scraps of paper, stamps, letters, passages of prose poetry, and an exploded version of Carson's translation of Catullus 101. All of these visual and textual materials are arranged across a large, accordion-formatted book in a somewhat orderly collage: on the left side of each spread, a single word from the Catullus poem is defined through an ever-widening branch of etymological connections, while the right side of each spread generally contains the materials more "personal" to Carson—in particular, photographs and prose poems.

The surface similarities between *Nox* (2010)—Latin for "night"—and Howe's *The Midnight* (2003) are striking and suggest the extent to which Howe's volume broke ground for Carson and other poets. Like *The Midnight*, *Nox* constructs its elegy through a visual and verbal collage that includes not only family photographs, but also dictionary entries and source texts related to the night. The two books also share a clear project of resurrection—Carson's figuration of the egg and the phoenix are to *Nox* what the interleaf and the "relational space" are to *The Midnight*. Still there are significant differences between the two elegies, too. Whereas the sense by which *The Midnight* manifests the interstitial, relational space and calls back on stage the absent mother is primarily *touch*—the touch of the author as her hands

play over the books and personal belongings of her mother, or the touch of the reader as she first feels the interleaf in *Kidnapped* or rearranges and reorders the pages of *The Midnight* itself—*Nox* refers primarily to sight and to visual metaphors. Where *The Midnight* stresses presence, *Nox* emphasizes the visibility of absence—an appropriate enough effect, given the strange separation and silence that existed between Carson and her brother, even before his final removal in death.

The relative commercial success of *Nox* seems due in large part to the apparent novelty of its box binding, its unconventional accordion format, and to its provocative arrangement of text and color images. Though Carson's metaphors do not address the sense of touch as consistently as *The Midnight* or *cloud-net*, the book's accordion format does demand that the reader handle the book in a different way, and experience the length of its pages in a conspicuously physical form. By all accounts, *Nox* continues to emerge as a well-loved book, and its commercial success (relative to the standards set for poetry) may well have significant implications for future explorations in tactile poetics. If the public reception of *Nox* indicates anything, it is that there is a significant audience of readers who are willing—indeed, who are thrilled—to encounter texts not only on semantic, visual, and aural terms, but on tactile terms as well.

***myein***

*"This Jeffersonian, Neo-classical building we inherit as a real emblem of an American democratic ideal. And so, I wanted to*

*engage that in a building. How do we deal with the stains of our own history? How do we take those aspects of our social history—slavery being the largest one, that we have a democratic country that was founded and based in slavery—and how do you talk about that? And I felt like the only way to do it perhaps was very abstractly.” (Anne Hamilton, “myein”)*

*A grid of steel and rippled glass runs the length of the edifice, obstructing direct entrance to the courtyard and distorting the view of the Pavilion’s bright façade. The crisp lines and symmetry of columns, pediment, and dome shimmer in a haze, and the solid stone, with its assured inscription, runs watery. A plain wooden table stands centered between the Pavilion’s four pale columns, its face studded with a surface of knotted, white cotton cloths. Between its legs, the tails of the white cloth forms gather in a thick, unseemly tangle. The arched threshold of the building looms just beyond the table, and reveals a glimpse of the soft white glow from the inner walls.*

*The heart of the building reveals three rooms, each with white walls appliquéd with miniscule Braille plasters. The Braille nodules bubble on the walls, as though the language itself had emerged from deep within the walls, as though the Braille were of the walls. The rooms bleed—fine fuchsia powder sifts from the edges of the ceilings, and the small nodules become gradually more visible. The barely audible sound of a recorded whisper emanates from an invisible source and moves throughout the rooms. Encoded in the Braille, excerpts from Charles Reznikoff’s Testimony; in the whispers, the words of Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, rearticulated in international alphabet code. On the floors of each room, scuffs and trails in the fuchsia powder trace*

*the footfalls and hand-markings of visitors to the Pavillion. Their traces glow, ghostly negatives of their movement through the rooms and accumulated red pigment.*

STATI VNITI D'AMERICA. These words, incised on the face of the United States Pavilion's neo-classical pediment, overlook Ann Hamilton's installation at the 1999 Venice Biennale, *myein*. Literally written in stone, the words restate and emphasize the steadfast aesthetic and ideological linkages between the Pavilion's regular, Jeffersonian architecture and the Capitol in Washington, D.C.. Through its material transformations between the bodies of its viewers, the walls of its architectural structure, and the text of Reznikoff's poetry and Lincoln's address, *myein* takes on the Pavilion as a whole, both its structure and the national histories that flow through it, as its subject of critique.

*myein* reveals, through the body's interaction with a materially transformed and translated language, a critical view of an American history in which the Democratic ideals of the nation state, paradoxically enough, have weighed heavily on actual human bodies. The Braille manifestations of Reznikoff's poems bubble from the surfaces of the walls, while the powder that stains them seems to drift and bleed from the ceiling itself. Thus the poems, which function both as straightforward reportage of small American tragedies, as well as critiques of the unregulated free enterprise that allows them to happen, live in the Neo-Classical walls themselves, which run red with an abstracted stream of blood and of tears. Those visitors who cannot read the Braille of the walls are, ironically, blind to the poetic text, and the histories of American violence it records. The international code translation of

the whispered recording disperses Lincoln's inaugural address almost irrevocably into bits of sound for the casual auditor.

The relation *myein* suggests between the Braille testimony and the reader is a relation of tactile translation. In order to experience the text of *Testimony* or Lincoln's address, the reader must place herself in physical contact with the whisper or wall, ear to pen to paper or skin of the hand to skin of the wall, as the case may be. By initiating contact, the readers become implicated in the texts' obscured histories, their hands red as they read. That this contact should take place within the context of the Venice Biennale is all the more significant, for *myein* makes its self-critical turn in a highly publicized and very public, international venue. What *myein* teaches through its tactual engagement is mindfulness: as its readers touch and translate its poetic texts, they gain an awareness of the violence that descends from Democratic ideologies, as well as a visible sign of their complicity in its history. What is ultimately hoped for is an alternative rewriting of the past within the contemporary—not a rewriting that forgets, but a rewriting that remembers historical trespasses and remains vigilant against their contemporary survivals.

### **Digital Tactualities**

In an era when the sales of digital books at major U.S. online retailers have surpassed the sales of their printed and bound predecessors, the future of the book, and of the visual and tactile innovations necessary for tactual poïesis, is unclear. It is a commonplace by now to predict the death of poetry



or of the book in print entirely, just as others have predicted the death of painting, as well as other media and genres. What seems more likely to happen in the face of new technologies, if historical trends continue and if the work of Pamela Z proves to be any indication, is a preservation of older genres and media through their expansion and integration with new forms of media and technology.

Although Z herself does not work strictly within the limits of poetry or the book form, her performance art defines what it means to inhabit the space of the book in the expanded field. Indeed, many of her on-stage performances, with their overlays of projected images, music, spoken word tracts, projected texts, and Z's dancing, singing, and performing body, look as though a page from *The Midnight* or *Dictée* had been exploded into a fully three-dimensional, theatrical space. In this regard, Z is the direct descendent of earlier European avant-gardes poets and performance artists, and her technological expansions of the human body and the voice in her on-stage performances would certainly have been the envy of Tristan Tzara or Hugo Ball.

In "MetalVoice," an excerpt from Z's longer performance piece *Voci*, Z stands before, touches, breathes upon, and sings against two hanging metal sheets in order to produce an entirely otherworldly sound effect. The live action sound of this performance interweaves simultaneously with a spoken track—a series of stuttered consonants, and fragments of speech which never fully resolve into a complete sentence or narrative: "the human voice is produce," "which produce the voice," "the air from the lungs," "the vocal chords tighten." With each breath, cry, and touch of her hand, Z forms a sonic symbiosis between human body and inhuman material. The mist of her

breath is visible on the mirrored surface of the metal, clouding in short plosives the distorted reflection of her face. Already these are the makings of a kind of cyborg performance, and yet the continuities between Z's biological body and inanimate materials, between her body and digital technology, are still more complicated.

As Z steps away from the hanging metal sheets, she swings her arms down through the air as though she were pounding a physical object. A deep percussive sound accompanies her gestures in a perfect synchronicity of sound and movement. The piece of technology responsible for the link between gesture and sound is called a BodySynth:

[a] MIDI controller that transforms movement, gestures, and other muscle efforts into sounds. The performer attaches electrodes to the body over various muscles. The tiny electrical signals generated by muscle contractions are measured and analyzed by a microprocessor. A variety of processing algorithms are available through the keypad on the Processor Unit. These algorithms translate effort into MIDI commands thus causing the body to become a controller for an electronic sound module such as a synthesizer or a sampler. ("BodySynth")

With each movement of her body, Z is able to communicate a range of instructions to the processor unit on her computer, which in turn interpolates her commands and produces the selected electronic sounds. Though perhaps not obvious, the sense through which the BodySynth and the body interact is none other than the sense of touch, through Z's own sense of proprioception.

In many of her performances, including *Voci*, Z also creates sound loops of her voice and other noises in real time on stage, so that the audience witnesses the artist moving through the actual process of producing, recording, and releasing the sounds. As the sound loops begin to repeat, they create an atmosphere of sonic collage, through which Z interweaves her voice and other found noises in real time. Her simultaneous activation of the BodySynth sounds, the looped recordings, her voice and found sounds, the projections of images and text on screen and over her body and the architecture of the stage, and her precise, dancing movement is nothing short of the awesome orchestra that Apollinaire had envisioned a century earlier, and Z, the Diseuse come alive.

## APPENDIX A

### ON *THE MIDNIGHT*: A CONVERSATION WITH SUSAN HOWE

JPB: My first question is probably an obvious one, given what I've told you about my background, but a lot has been said about the transition that you made between painting and poetry, and I was just wondering—although I'm getting a glimpse of your workspace—is painting something that you've, painting proper, that is, something that you've given up completely?

SH: Yes, except that with my latest work, you might call it a kind of word collage. I mean, I've gone out into such an extreme in this piece, *Frolic Architecture*, not painting, but with collaging words on paper. I wouldn't consider that I do painting. No, I don't do painting. But I'm doing something at this point. And you know, I've done so much thinking about Dickinson's late fragments, and what fascinates me is that line: what is the line between painting and drawing? At what point does one become the other? And this also involves music, too. Sound, sight, and meaning. I'm just fascinated by that, and I think working on, certainly, Dickinson led me there. Well, and my obsession with manuscripts. All those people: Peirce, Edwards, and Dickinson. There's something about their manuscripts that I don't—well, with Dickinson I can understand it and read the words, but with Peirce, I'm not a logician. But those graphs, his late existential graphs, seem to be to me wanting to cross that line, or blend sight and sound and meaning and words so that they're one thing. With Edwards' manuscripts, they're just visually...

they're thrilling to behold, visually, as objects. The material object itself, before you've read a word on the page, is visually charged.

JPB: You can definitely see how the painter's impulse—if you want to call it that, though I hate phrases like that—has been translated into your poetics. It's definitely still felt there. When you're writing, or you're actually producing a text, to what extent are the words plastic for you, or material for you? Is it something you can feel as well as see?

SH: Well, yes. I quote over and over again this thing by Beuys, that every mark on paper is acoustic, so that yes. Or sometimes the sight of a misspelled, or a word spelled in an old way in a manuscript, or some little mistake that I've made in typing is visually... gives me an idea, or is visually full of suggestion. Because I have to do this Dickinson thing with the Botanical Garden... you know she made this herbarium, and I have a copy of her herbarium, and that's just flowers pasted into press [missing word] book, with the word underneath pasted in. So basically there's the object and the word together, and it's really interesting to me that that was a book she made as a teenager, and that in her late, late fragments and drafts, again, it seems like that sense is never lost. When I was shifting, actually really shifting from painting to just writing, I was in Cornell, and there was in this bird place, this bird sanctuary, where I used to walk, and I got books, because of the farming school and everything. I made these things with just a picture of a bird, the name under it, and then watercolor and drawn lines. That was literally... it was the word, and sometimes they didn't relate. Sometimes it was just a bird's name I thought was beautiful, and I would put it up with a color and

with lines. So it's sort of strange that you should be here, because it was... after that I started making these, what I would call artist's books, which were just literally that. They were bird names, pictures, watercolor, and some penciled lines. It really was in Ithaca that in this walking bird sanctuary that I somehow crossed over till finally, after that, the words were what obsessed me, more than the picture or the photograph.

JPB: Where were you working when you were in Ithaca? Did you have a place?

SH: Oh, my husband was there teaching, he was the Visiting, so he had a giant studio. I had two small children and a room, so I was only doing these—they were watercolor paper. I wasn't doing big paintings. The fact that I was on paper, not pouring color onto canvasses the way I'd been doing in New York... it became about books and paper.

JPB: So just that little shift in medium...

SH: Yeah, and then I got enthralled by watercolor paper, good quality paper.

JPB: It's always the deckled edge that gets me...

SH: I know, I know, I know. It's just...

JPB: I think it's because the deckling actually lets you see the inside of the paper a little bit. You get a sense of its physical width...

SH: It also gives you a sense of the thickness... by the way, that [gesturing] is recent work of mine. That sheet... mine is all scanned, because I do cut and paste, with scotch tape and everything, and Leslie does high definition scanning of these things, so that you get a sense of the depth, which you won't get in the New Directions book. But the paper, and the label that you can see goes into the paper... And with Edwards' manuscripts, oh my God, he had to use every kind of paper he could get. You get restored to the feeling that the paper is literally made out of clothes, that it's made out of rags. That they were printing... there weren't many places in New England, and they literally were hand making paper. Then he'd also do things on fan paper that his wife and daughter were making fans to earn money with. So, anyway...

JPB: You can't bore me with this stuff, I'm also a graphic designer!

SH: Paper, is just! And when you work in watercolor, the problem with watercolor for me was you had to have better and better paper. I just got more and more fussy about paper, and the color. If you dropped a color onto the paper, that was it. If it didn't work, it wasted like \$14.50 worth of...

JPB: I know, that's watercolor for you. That's why I switched to oils!

SH: But I just loved that transparency. I just loved it. So anyway, that's why it's been a thrill to work with.

JPB: What's key about that, is if you're working on a nice background like that, once you've covered that whiteness [with opaque paint], you can't get that lightness back. But when you've got the transparent layering of watercolor, it will show through.

SH: Yeah.

JPB: I still have to be really careful about not over-painting the ground...

SH: You're right...

JPB: If I want the light to show through. You can lay in white later and paint over it with a thin glaze, but it's not the same.

SH: That's true, it's this issue of transparency. That leads me to the flyleaf. I just bought this book, for instance, with Susan [Stewart]—I was visiting Susan in Princeton—I bought an old secondhand book simply because it had a good flyleaf, and I love the look of this, and the way that... you know, I just thought, "What can I do with that? I can't. I've already been there, done that now."

JPB: You could just do a collection.

SH: I don't have a camera, and Peter [Hare], who took the photographs, is dead. Anyway, the material object, it fascinates me.



JPB: I guess that's what I'm curious about. There's a real predisposition in our culture to think about the paper as being depthless, or bodiless...

SH: Right.

JPB: ...and the mark that's made on it. When it's a symbol that we recognize, it's a symbol that points elsewhere for its significance. It has no body of its own, and I think that your work really runs counter to that. Calling our attention back to those things, back to the material condition of it...

SH: Well, I'm also... you know, it's very important to me what font I use. I don't, I can't... on the screen, ultimately, everything is about the thing coming out of the printer.

JPB: You have to print it.

SH: I have to print it out, because I'm from a typewriter culture.

JPB: Actually that is still one of the first things they'll teach you in a graphic design class. Still.

SH: Oh really?

JPB: Yes, projected on the screen, it doesn't matter... if you're designing for print, you must print it out and see what it looks like. And they're right, because sometimes it's really shocking what the output is. What you think the

type size on the screen is, versus what is coming out of the printer, can be quite different. Colors are interpolated differently on screens because you're moving from RGB to CMYK.

SH: Yeah, yeah.

JPB: But also, when I was designing, it was always something special to have something to hold afterwards. If I was making a website, I felt it could all go away in a heartbeat because it was all just bits. There was nothing to hold. But making a book is something else.

SH: Well, you may be the last... you may be speaking for the last generation!

JPB: I hope not. I wanted to ask you about the little books, the books from Granary and from Coracle, because they are a little bit different. Are they part of *The Midnight*, actually? How do they work together? Is there a larger project?

SH: Margaret Warner wrote a really interesting piece on how the Coracle one is an Irish book, and why it is an Irish book....

JPB: But there's so much shared material there.

SH: Yeah, no, no. But see, the Coracle book is less anxiety. The part about Sheridan and the Irish, and then some autobiographical part that I felt wouldn't [fit] in my respectable book...

JPB: I noticed that Dracula got taken out.

SH: Dracula got taken out, and I loved the Dracula thing! But it didn't... this thing was taken over a long period of time, but I couldn't fit it in when I was being really serious. The Irish one I can just throw everything out there and have fun, because that's a small press, and they're very fun. Simon and Erica are just... I just didn't worry. But because I'm caught up in academia, I just was trying to make something... it didn't cohere. I felt it didn't cohere. The Irish book is a very small thing, and then again it got bigger and bigger. But of course they use beautiful...

JPB: Yes, the photographs in there, they were tipped in...

SH: I know, and they gave me the clear paper. But it had to be much, much shorter.

JPB: Do you know, the copy of *Kidnapped* that I got, I think that someone thought that the interleaved paper, I think they thought it was trash.

SH: Oh, and they just threw it out!

JPB: It's a library book, and it's not in there anymore!

SH: There you go.

JPB: It was an interlibrary loan, and when I got it, I thought, “Great, now I can touch and listen to that interleaf.” But no.

SH: Ohhh.

JPB: I know, isn’t that frustrating?

SH: But I must say I thought the idea of making it not transparent, which I do like in the New Directions book, too, that you know what it’s supposed to be, but it isn’t...

JPB: That was interesting because you get a real sense of the interleaf as a three dimensional object the way they’ve set it up, because you see the front and the back as though it were there.

SH: No, that was fun too. We sort of worked that out. But then three years later I see this. Let me just show you. The one I’m showing you that they did that was beautiful [searching for Robert Walser’s *Microscripts*]. Here.

JPB: Wow. Oh. He’s a novelist, too, right?

SH: Yeah. No, he’s not a poet.

JPB: I must have misheard his name. I know his fiction. When I was an undergraduate, somebody wrote their honors thesis on him while I was writing on Stevens.

SH: Well, it's just to show you how they *can* do it. Beautiful book.

JPB: Yeah. Wow, talk about the...

SH: Yeah, yeah! I mean, no, it's just...

JPB: ... heavy paper...

SH: I need it for this new book of mine, but...

JPB: ...nicely cut. Although you know, there's something about this, and I don't know how you feel about it, but there's something about having a book like this that repels you.

SH: Oh, you mean cause it's so fancy, or what?

JPB: Well, as a reader I would be...

SH: Oh, to read it comfortably...

JPB: I would be very slow to actually intervene in the text with marking of my own...

SH: [laughing]. Yeah, I know what you mean, me too.

JPB: I don't think I could touch... it sort of announces itself as, "The walls are up. Don't touch me." And certainly don't write in the margins.

SH: Well that's what artist's books tend to do.

JPB: I don't know that *The Midnight* does that, though, but I'll probably ask you about that, especially because I do a certain assignment with my freshman. You might hate it. Maybe I shouldn't tell you! But anyway, could you talk a little more about what you were able to do with the small press? I'm sure some things were able to be retained for *The Midnight*, while some things didn't lend themselves to the larger publishing house's format. What was lost? What was retained? Did anything emerge in the New Directions version that you thought was an improvement?

SH: I honestly do think that the New Directions version is an improvement on the book—on the writing in the book. I think it's more ambitious. But a visual improvement, I don't... but I can tell you with earlier books... See, my editor now, Barbara Edwards, is really thoughtful and careful and will do anything—within limits—that I ask. I mean, I had to work hard. I'm sorry to walk away, but have you see this one? Working with small presses. These are just heaven.

JPB: No, I haven't gotten the chance to get my hands on these before.

SH: There's no question that when you work with a good small press, you're outside the capitalist nexus. It's done for love, and it's not money.

JPB: Is this letterpress?

SH: That's letterpress. She just did such a beautiful job.

JPB: It's the funniest thing, but with letterpress the word just sinks a little more down in the page...

SH: It does, it does.

JPB: ...and something about that really jazzes me. I don't know why.

SH: And then it goes into the Wesleyan book, which in those days I didn't get anything I wanted with space. Now people... I must say, I do think I broke ground for a lot of people. I see beautiful books now from Wesleyan.

JPB: I've seen reproductions from this text, but of course they don't...

SH: Well, once that goes into New Directions, then I had an editor who wasn't so up on page space and I didn't make demands. One of the first things that goes away when you go to a bigger press is space. They don't like blank paper. They don't like blank space on a page. So that's one thing, and that's where I admire Anne Carson, that somehow she's been able to insist on it in ways that I never was able. With the Sappho book, I would have dreamed for Emily Dickinson's fragments to get such a book, but no.

JPB: Not yet?

SH: No, not ever.

JPB: They've got a really tight lock on them.

SH: They've got a really tight lock on them.

JPB: Are those just gone now? You can't examine them anymore at all?

SH: It's getting harder and harder, yeah.

JPB: But they let you in?

SH: They let me in, yeah. [laughing]

JPB: What about the Granary book with Susan Bee? What was that collaborative process like? It seems like there were holes in the drawings where the text slots in.

SH: We were together—they summered out here, so we were really together when I was writing it, and then she would do a drawing. As I remember, it was a big sharing, with the fact that we were in Guilford, and it was all this sort of old stuff. We could do it not so that you would submit your work, and then someone else would make something up about it. On the other hand, my sensibility is minimalist in a way that Susan's isn't.



JPB: I think her sensibility is exuberant.

SH: Yeah, it's a very different art sensibility. So the one Coracle did is more my severe kind of...

JPB: Yes, in *Bedhangings*, her drawings are so exuberant—there's whimsy there.

SH: And it pulls the poem in a whimsical direction that is more than the poem is actually whimsical. But it was fun to do.

JPB: There is such a sharp return, though, in *Bed Hangings II*... I thought, "Oh, well this looks more familiar."

SH: [laughing]. No, they're very different. But it was fun to do. I think that we didn't get a beautiful production like this—this wasn't letterpress...

JPB: It does have a nice size to it. It's so funny that this one's so big, and the other two are so diminutive.

SH: You don't have—I'll give you, actually, my latest... I'm not sure about this, by the way. This is from Coracle. These were little found poems that I did.

JPB: Can I open this?

SH: Yeah. Again, it's not... it's not a book. But it is sort of fun, it's in a box.

JPB: I'm a very big fan of boxed poems, I don't know why. I'll have to read that one [Nox] and see what I think about it. Wow.

SH: I guess they're into small. When it comes to me, they always do small.

JPB: Really, look at this.

SH: They're totally things I found. They're absolutely found notes. They were notes to objects in a museum.

JPB: For something like this, which of course I've never seen before, what's your sense of...

SH: Well, my sense of this poem, actually, is that it's really almost not a poem. It literally is found, it's found.

JPB: What's your sense of authorship? Are you a curator here?

SH: [laughing]. I would like that. I mean, it was published at the—Berlin mutilated it when they published it—so I think of it as sort of a series poem, but it's not serious. It's more like kind of a fun thing.

JPB: But these remind me so much of some of the pieces that you have in *The Midnight*, where you've got these bits taken from Mrs. Bury...

SH: ...Palliser's [*History of Lace*], oh yeah. I love that kind of thing. These are just amazing.

JPB: They become scraps of material, too, you know, these little documentary bits that get sort of seamlessly jammed in with the rest of the stanza, and visually there's not an obvious break, and you suddenly find yourself in a different register.

SH: I just love doing that. I love knocking one thing up against another thing.

JPB: These are wonderful. Talk about nifty packaging. Where was I? I should ask you about the composition process itself for *The Midnight*. I think you had mentioned that you laid things out on a table, and that you were moving them around. With something that's so collage-based and you're dealing with so much source material...

SH: I really can't remember how... you know, my mother had just died, and left all these possessions, and I was just starting to live with Peter in his house and he would take photographs. I think it was actually Simon. I first was in Ireland, and Simon and Erica wanted to do something of mine, and I didn't have anything at that point, and I talked about all these books. I think maybe we'd taken some pictures of the books, and he said, "Well, why don't

you do something with the books?” I’d already written the Dracula part, and other stuff for an essay—I think it’s in *Close Listening*—

JPB: It is.

SH: So this is a collage of a lot of things that seemed to fall together. It just was created as it went along. Then I pushed it into a certain order. The next thing came the books... I can’t remember when I became fascinated by the scrap, this thing, the flyleaf. But the flyleaf got me into the serious organization of the book. Obsessing over this flyleaf. I mean, it took me ages to write these two pages. Ages and ages. Then Peter happened to have this incredibly wonderful book in his family on the history of lace. I just love that picture. Then it took off, is all I can say, it took off.

JPB: Those two pages in the front matter—they’re great. It’s *Hamlet*, isn’t it? “Counterfeit presentment of...”

SH: Yes, right, right. My uncle, who never married—the funny thing was, I don’t think he was gay because he always sort of had women—but there seems to me to be a subtext in this book that I don’t even get, and it seems to be around a kind of men’s effeminacy. Because I end up with Hart Crane, then it’s Cocteau. I don’t know. I consider that this in the end is a very happy book, and it was partly happy because I had just discovered Peter, and he basically rescued me. I suddenly found this darling man who would do all these photographs, who loved books the way I loved books. We had such fun doing the photographs. He would take the picture, and then I would edit it.

We take it down and place it, and then bring it back and I would cut it and take it back down there. It was really a process of...

JPB: What's interesting to me about those photographs is that most people take photographs of three-dimensional objects. We think that books aren't three dimensional objects, we think that pages aren't three dimensional objects...

SH: Yeah.

JPB: But they are. They are subjects for photographs.

SH: Right, right.

JPB: But we call them two-dimensional all the time. Paper is two-dimensional, painting is two-dimensional. We say that. And so here's a book where almost all of the photographs—except the one with the turtle magnifying glass—are pretty much of these “flat” pieces. And they've not just been scanned in—they're clearly photographs of the object.

SH: Well I wish they could have been in color, because the color was so nice.

JPB: It was nice to see them tipped in in the earlier books, I will say.

SH: Yeah, no, if I could have had that kind of money, they would have been in color. Because you see even a color like that—this—I love this color.

JPB: It's more expressive, that sepia.

SH: Yeah, I love that sepia color. I just love it. And we took many more photographs that are in the book. Many, many.

JPB: There are different ones, I noticed. Some of them don't show up from those Coracle editions in *The Midnight*.

SH: Oh yeah, yeah, that's true. But there are many more. I took many, many. I look at it and think, "Oh God, this was really a happy book." You know, Peter was a philosopher, and a lot of the philosophy things that come in are ideas that he gave me, places to go look. It was just great, it was so much fun. Then of course I've always loved Robert Louis Stevenson, and I loved where it would lead you, to these weird coincidences, doublings that you didn't... and of course the parks.

JPB: It's really hard to write about this book, because you don't even know where to start. It's just this huge constellation...

SH: Yes, Marjorie's written...

JPB: Yes, she just put out a piece, and Gerald Bruns has an essay on it as well. Those were the first two in a very long time.

SH: Oh no, it didn't get any notice, this book.

JPB: When I was in Buffalo for the Creeley conference, that's what you had said to me, that you felt that it had just gone away.

SH: It did go away.

JPB: I thought, "How can that be, for such a..."

SH: Well, it can. It can be, it can really be! I'm afraid it has gone away.

JPB: I hope not. I do hope that the notice that's being taken with Marjorie's article, and with Gerald's article, and even with the PENN and Temple events...

SH: It will be in her book. She has a book coming out. And then there's a new book on me, but I don't know if they'll talk about *The Midnight*...

JPB: I don't think that they do—because I panicked briefly, and looked it up!

SH: Will Montgomery, is that the book?

JPB: I'll have to look again.

SH: Because it's not out yet—I haven't seen it. How could you see it?

JPB: Maybe I'm thinking of another one.

SH: There is another one, by a woman who does art stuff that just came out.

JPB: Okay, well, I'll look for it.

SH: I don't know what he's going to say.

JPB: This is getting back to what you talking about earlier, you started to talk about collage. Collage is a mode of composition that is imported and naturalized from the visual arts—it doesn't seem to start in literature, but it's very familiar to us by now. Does making a verbal collage—though you have some visual material, too—differ from its visual counterpart? What exactly about the collage process is tactile?

SH: It's hard for me to talk about that, because I feel it's so profound. I can't explain to you, but I was... for instance, I always write over there, at that table. This thing I did over here [*Frolic Architecture*], and that collaboration I did with David Grubbs, the music thing, that's been very important to me, and he sent me some new music that was really interesting. I was playing some of those pieces, and then I just was... it was a lot of fun, too, but it was not over there. It was not on my computer. I have to sometimes run things through the computer to get a different font, but I'm only thinking as I'm talking now, but it was definitely hands-on. But... it's got a narrative. You can't tell here, because there isn't much here, but it's terribly important to me that there is a narrative. And my big worry is that in the art book is that it's just presented just like this. Basically it was taken, most of it, from these funny little journals I



found by Hannah Edwards, the sister of Jonathan Edwards, and mixing other things. Ovid. Because I'm trying to get a sense of the 18<sup>th</sup> C American landscape of the sublime as opposed to Ovid. And so you see, there's some narrative. You wouldn't see now. But if you read it, you're supposed to be able to read it as some kind of narrative. And my big problem in this New Directions book is to make this first piece that is going to somehow indirectly [...] that helps in some way to explain this. I don't know, I can't tell you what the differences are, but this is the book. This is what the book is going to be like. I've never taken a book to such an extreme as that.

JPB: Does having it on 8.5" x 11" like that matter?

SH: I love it. I'm always crushed when I... because I think 8.5 x 11. And it is going to be 8.5 x 11, the book is.

JPB: Oh really?

SH: The book is, because the book does exist.

JPB: I was just thinking it would be a nightmare to make that conform to a different size.

SH: Well, the New Directions edition will. Cheaply, like that. I think we're going to use Welling's things in it. Isn't that beautiful? The words on it are beautiful to me. The word "ravished." I'm now trying to figure out how to read

this aloud. I'm actually going to work with David Grubbs, we may do something.

JPB: That would be a challenge to read that. [laughing]

SH: I know. But I'm gonna do it, somehow! I'll leave parts out, but anyway...

JPB: That is one of the questions that my students will ask me a lot when they encounter your work. They'll say, "Well, how do you read that?" And I say, "Exactly, that's exactly the question to be asking." It's probably the first time that's ever occurred to them, that there could be a different way to read something. To me, even though they're frustrated as hell, I think that's just a wonderful moment to see that crack opening in their brains.

SH: Yeah, yeah. Why? Some of my work seems so clear to me—well, *that* doesn't—but I don't ultimately... that's all you can ask. Really, all you can ask is to speak to, as Stevens says, a reader. I don't understand why it would set people...

JPB: ...into such a tizzy?

SH: A tizzy! I mean, it's really not as radical as a lot of the work out there.

JPB: Maybe if it's your first time that you've seen anything like it. I don't know what my students are used to reading. The more that they write with text

messages and Facebook and stuff, I would think that they would be even more used to discontinuity...

SH: That's what I would think, too.

JPB: And yet in some ways, they're not, because they don't—many of them, this is not fair to all of them—many of them are not willing to spend the time that you need to have it repaid by the text at hand. I don't think that it's there, for many of them, the emotional transference back and forth between the text, that affective engagement that you need, that happens when you're now invested and are willing to open your imaginative life to the text.

SH: Well, maybe it's not a good work for young people. That's another thing. I do have a younger audience, but they're all sort of artists in New York.

JPB: There was one student I had though—she'll love it if she ever hears this—she was so angry at *The Midnight*. She said, "Why doesn't this make sense to me?" But she kept on reading. And reading. I sort of chuckled to myself: Susan Howe got you. You kept reading it, and now you've written a paper on it! She could have chosen any book on the syllabus to write about, but she chose *The Midnight*. And I thought, there's something there for her, if she keeps coming back to it.

SH: I remember when I was about 14, and we had a French teacher at the school that I went to that we adored, and we wanted to give her a present at the end of the year. She was French, and she was very sophisticated. We

heard she liked this person called Matisse—this was in Cambridge where, God, we never saw anything, never knew anything about modern painting. I remember we went and we got a big, expensive... at a place where you would buy posters. And it was the first time I had seen Matisse. I just was appalled. I just thought, “Oh, this is just. What is this? This is crazy.” And I could not stop thinking about it. I just could not stop thinking about it. I always remember that because now, of course, Matisse is nothing... nothing in terms of surprise. But then, I remember that feeling of, “This can’t be right!” It was just an assault, but it fascinated me.

JPB: I think that’s what happening.

SH: Who knows?

JPB: Later on, when I taught creative writing, I had three of these students come back from that class, and they wanted to keep reading work like that. They came back for it, and when they saw the syllabus for this class, which assigned poems that were more visually normative, they wondered, “What’s this?” I thought we’d made some inroads then. It all comes down to expectations. The way that you say you look at the word “ravishing,” and you say it’s beautiful, I don’t know if you can teach that.

SH: No, you can’t. That’s why I’m a Calvinist. It has to do with predestination. If it doesn’t hit you, it doesn’t hit you.

JPB: But I feel that way, too. I think if someone has that capacity and they come to your work, they won't be affronted or repelled immediately. I wanted to ask about the typography of the stanzas—the collections of poetic lines—if you could talk about their visual appearance on the page, their relationship to the margins, or the ground.

SH: I have become more and more obsessive as I go, and it's even worrying me, that I must, if I'm writing a poem, like these poems here—I want to have almost a justified margin on the right.

JPB: Oh, I noticed.

SH: I know! But I'm not going to do it—you could click it on the computer and make it justified there.

JPB: Oh no, but there's something really strong about having it technically, actually be rag right.

SH: Right. But I feel that it has something also to do with meter, with sound, that I don't even get myself, but it's definitely something, it has to be concerned with syllables. Because I have an ear. I will say, I know I do have an ear. A lot of these poems are about having an ear, in a way. I must have double space. It must be in the center. More and more, I'm working and one faces the other. Now I need that mode where I need two pages.

JPB: You're thinking about spreads now.

SH: Yeah, I'm thinking about spreads. I am writing in terms of spreads.

JPB: That's not at all surprising if you think of the structure of *The Midnight*—it really has that bifocal structure where you're going back and forth between poetry and prose.

SH: That's true.

JPB: You're constantly in transit between the different modes.

SH: I'm sure students say, 'This doesn't connect to this, why is it...? To me, it mirrors this, and it does connect... but what I love is the fact that this blank, that the connection is something that's quite magic, or unsaid, unspoken. In my head, this connection... you might find a connection, but it definitely was there in my head. They do connect. That mystery of the blank in the center. That relation fascinates me.

JPB: But that's the difference. They're looking for syntactic continuity, and you're using the form of the book itself, the physical object, to create the continuity, and that is a level of connection that may be invisible for some readers.

SH: Except first it's just the paper. I lay out the line of these things, flat, when I'm working, so it's an open book, and as I say, I'm always shocked when

finally I get the book and it's not that size paper. It's not that much margin. This was very—I must say, I would have loved to have had that in color.

JPB: That's all right, I found the originals. They are quite nice. I know why you wanted them.

SH: Where did you find them?

JPB: Google, actually. I found the illustrations. They have photographic reproductions.

SH: Really?

JPB: I sure did.

SH: That would be from Coracle, right?

JPB: Oh, no. Not from these, but from the actual things that were photographed. The actual books. *At the Back of the North Wind*, those illustrations.

SH: Oh God.

JPB: That one is just glorious where she's surrounding Diamond with her hair...

SH: Oh God!

JPB: Even in those images, it's interesting how you splice between that and the poem.

SH: I loved this, I loved finding Michael Drayton. I got totally fascinated by these, the starch ruffs. All these things are getting obsessed over by me, and when I was in Germany, there were so many wonderful paintings with the ruffs. And this thing on her head, you see? I just love this painting. It's like paper! But anyway, whether that connects with the flyleaf or paper, I don't...

JPB: I suspect that it does. I'll try to ask questions in a way that will help elucidate it, but I don't know if I'll be able to. I know something in my gut, but I haven't found the words yet to describe what you're talking about with the gutter of the book...

SH: Yeah, the gutter! I love that it's called the gutter.

JPB: Yes, it's magic, but that's almost all you can say, almost all I can articulate about it. I'm trying to explain this, but I'm just stuttering trying to say it. Collage is bringing things into contact that aren't usually together, that seem on the surface. But within "contact" is "tact," is "tactile," and there's something about that as a mode of composition in itself that has to do with touch itself.

SH: Yes, touch, touch.



JPB: But what's interesting is you open with that *Master of Ballantrae* title page and through the interleaf, reproduce that, and then you've got these really provocative lines about word and picture being essentially rivals. Ostensibly, the interleaf is meant to keep them apart, to separate them out so that they don't rub up against each other, so they don't touch each other.

SH: Of course, now you could go on about the ruff, the starch ruff that separates the head from the body.

JPB: Well, the body is the earthly and the profane, and the head.

SH: [laughing]

JPB: It's just the gutter. It's really odd, but...

SH: And it's starched, and I love the woman in exile.

JPB: So how do I ask this question. The interleaf is meant to keep text and image apart so that they don't rub off on each other and ruin each other—you call it a zone of contention, but it's not a bodiless zone. There's something really fleshly about this translucent paper—sometimes it's literally made of calf skin—there's something really fleshly about it. It's pale and ghostly.

SH: It's ghostly, that's what I like about it. It's very strong. And it lasts in these books. It has the sound. It brings this other sound into...

JPB: In spite of being so ephemeral.

SH: In spite of being so ephemeral. But you know, they also suck up, they often get the ink, so you do see things, and they're light and curtains.

JPB: That's what I was thinking—even though they're meant to keep text and image apart, there's something about that gesture of obfuscation, trying to keep them apart, so that they actually end up coming together. The flyleaf is a body where they can meet.

SH: Particularly the picture meets the paper. It's like when... in children's books it's great because you can feel this thing where you're supposed to move forward into the text, but as a child, you want to go back to the picture. That's saying go back, be disobedient, don't go. But in other books, when they do it in the famous books like that, or an etching of some worthy, then it's like it's adding a frame. It's sort of like it frames the importance of this person, who has to be sheltered by this. It means they're special, or the book's fancy or something.

JPB: I always think that when I find the cut edge to a book, I know it's always a fancier book.

SH: Becky, my daughter got me this book, because I love captivity narratives. Oh my God, this book...

JPB: This one's reproduced in the *The Midnight*.

SH: But I couldn't get enough of that, and I just love this!

JPB: And here's the iron turning brown in the ink in the handwriting.

SH: Here's this [the turtle magnifying glass]. That was Peter's, in his family.

JPB: Yes, that's the one!

SH: I love this! It's so dated, it's like a flyleaf, too.

JPB: Is that a bronze, or brass?

SH: It must be bronze. It's so old-fashioned, isn't it wonderful?

JPB: It's cute.

SH: It's just wonderful, anyway.

JPB: What I've been thinking lately is that the flyleaf provides this body or this space where the two—text and image—interpenetrate, they can live there, in the same way that—John Palatella said, it was an interesting claim, and I can see why he's making it, but he said that *The Midnight* is the most “textually normative” of your books because...

SH: Yeah, why?

JPB: Because the pictures are separate from the text...

SH: Oh yeah, because I didn't have things...

JPB: I take that point, and yet there's something else happening here. My question to you is, is the reader or the writer, the *body* of the reader or writer, an interleaf? Something that acts as a hinge? Poetry and prose are separate, but there's something that happens when you're moving the flyleaf—it makes that sound. The reader or writer becomes responsible for animating the text.

SH: That's true. I never thought of that, but it's a great idea. That's a great idea. The entrance of the reader into the body of the text.

JPB: That's really what got me.

SH: That's a wonderful idea, I didn't think of it.

JPB: So long as it doesn't feel off to you!

SH: No, that's a very good idea. It's a very good idea.

JPB: I think that's what happening with the neck ruffs and the lace, too. The book is a collage, it's a lacework, but lace is meant to be worn on the body. I wonder what it would mean, if you can imagine this book as being something

that—that tactile intervention with the book, when you’re moving it as you’re reading it and when you’re composing it when you’re writing it, is that a way of clothing yourself in that text, or in that lacework?

SH: Here’s the other thing about lacework—Susan knows more about sewing than me—anyway, she pointed this out to me. I was very interested in embroidery, too, which is different from lacework, but in embroidery, you see the picture, and then the other side is where all the knots are, and what made the picture are the knots that you don’t see, that don’t appear. That reminded me of Dickinson’s fragments, you know, because Harvard doesn’t really want them to be seen, because that messes up the image of the poet. And in fact, she’s showing you the knots. If you go for the fragments, you’re seeing the knots. But lace, of course, is transparent. Lace, you see through. And so you always see the other side. You always see it’s the same, you know what I mean? And somehow that’s very interesting to me. That you could say a flyleaf is... it’s not lace, but you see, lace has transparency.

JPB: Oh, absolutely. I have an earlier argument I was making about lace being a way of encouraging readers toward a constellated vision. Lace is basically a multiple set of eyelets.

SH: Yes! Right, that’s true.

JPB: I saw it as a metaphor functioning for some sort of plurality of vision, or of reading.

SH: But of course, too, women are... in the two poems in there, *Bed Hangings*, it's really the way ancient literature and myth, sort of like the way I put it in here differently, comes across the ocean, and it's there for people who can't read. It's there in the work of these women, basically, all these lace makers. In embroidery, in chairs, in furniture, in bed testers, and all of that.

JPB: It is a feminine, domestic production.

SH: Yeah, right. Right.

JPB: How important is that fact to you? Does that feel really significant?

SH: Yeah, it is significant, and even with the Edwards thing. The fact that he was one son with ten sisters, and they had the same education, and he was a middle child, so he was educated by some of his sisters. You know, it's a feminine household. He makes books, but his writing begins to look like sewing. There's the little wedding dress fragment. Even he is sort of stitching. I hated that idea about women's work when I wrote *My Emily Dickinson*. I was really anti-that kind of discussion about her, spiders and sewing really pissed me off, but now I've come around. It's like the return of the repressed, and I'm thinking that I'm extremely interested in the fact that it's this other culture. I mean, it's the one that doesn't get spoken of or cited as an individual... it's a group thing.

JPB: One other thing that I'm trying to figure out in this book is, of course it's an elegy, but it's doing something that I've never seen an elegy do before.

Because of all of the other things that are happening in it, it's a very unusual form for an elegy to take. And it's because of the documentary poetic aspect of it, and because of the theatricality of the text. Even when you talked about, if the text is a lacework and there are a lot of the images of the ruffs and everything. Lace and potentially texts being work on the body as a prosthesis or a costume, that reminds me of theatricality.

SH: Oh God, and of course it's my mother.

JPB: And of course with your mother. It's interesting, we think that theater is to be equated with artifice, with embroidery of facts.

SH: Oh yes.

JPB: Your father said your mother didn't know the truth from the lie.

SH: Yeah!

JPB: And what he couldn't understand about that. I was wondering if you could talk about how you think the documentary poetic aspect of the book, or the theatricality of the text, changes or affects its function as an elegy?

SH: Because it's an elegy for my mother, and if you knew the depths of theatricality that she... it's an elegy, also, for a kind of thing she represented, which was my idea of a kind of Anglo-Irish eccentricity, a Yeatsian period that is no longer. I never saw people like this. They were so funny. They were

something quite else. So not American. The only way to do this, to do an elegy for my mother, was to be theatrical, to bring the theater into it. I mean, because that's what she was. What's crucial is where I say... *Comus*, she directed *Comus*. She always was directing plays with us in them, and there would be Shakespeare, *Comus*, and it goes so I couldn't look at the woods like the landscape here, and very particularly in Elizabeth Park, I have this sense that I'm looking at a stage set. That Puck is going to suddenly be here. It's a veil. That nature is a veil, and that beyond the veil there are these spirits. And the spirits, actually, are in Milton and Shakespeare. The spirits have come through these works, or Yeats, but so that the American landscape, the new England one that I'm familiar with... it has this sort of, I can't describe it. As if there were a European landscape hidden in the trees somewhere, and it's a stage set. And again, in the park, that is one thing that I feel so strongly. I love Olmsted, that park in Buffalo. I think the park was designed in a way, and you could say a park is also a flyleaf. A park is between nature and the city, it's this space that is a country space in a city, so it's not the country. But he's, particularly in Delaware Park, he's been looking at European parks, at German paintings, like.... Oh God. Well, anyway, German Romantic paintings. So that was my mother. You go to the country, you look out at a wood like this here, and we'd be doing *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So that was to me the most crucial part of the book, the sense of the American landscape as opposed to the Irish. But it's hard to describe, and it's hard for someone who hasn't had that experience to understand what you mean.

JPB: As I'm reading, I'm seeing how much emphasis there was on making things, on acknowledging the materiality of things... staging a theatrical,



transitional, relational, magical space, in this flyleaf, seemed to me a way of calling back those spirits that you're talking about, and having the ghosts be there.

SH: Well, that's what I mean. And I felt those little fragments of paper that she had in the books. To have their books is to—particularly books of childhood—I mean, I do, I have, I do believe in a kind of telepathy.

JPG: How much do you think they're there?

SH: That's the only way they're there. They're there, to me, by just opening one of those books. The smell of the paper. It's the difference between European paper and American paper, so that there's a difference to me, between the English and Irish old books. Uncle John is just resurrected, for a moment, you know, in some way. Of course, I believe that marginal markings in our books are... books I've loved are the most precious things I have, and it's not about the writing in some ways, it's about the books. The books remain traces of things I've loved.

JPB: That's really exciting to hear.

SH: It is a form of telepathy.

JPB: That was my feeling. People would say, "Do you really think she thinks that they're in those books?" And I would say, "Yeah, I think that she does."

And you know, I think that they are, too. I don't think you're wrong. I may be of a similar bent, but...

SH: [laughing]. Right, right.

JPB: It's so moving at the end, where you're letting those bookmarks fall, almost like it's a game.

SH: Right, right, right. I know, it's like playing some kind of game of chance.

JPB: It's like runes.

SH: Right, right! When they fall, it gives a message.

JPB: Yeah. I thought that there's something interesting, again, that playfulness from theater as a kind of play or artifice, but playing games... and somehow, the act of playing, the act of touching, of engaging, of using, of carrying the books around... is a process of animation, and the person returns to you again, for awhile. That's what this chapter is about.

SH: Oh good.

JPB: I can't tell you what a thrill it is to get to sit down and talk to you.

SH: Well, it's been nice to talk to you. It's a nice to have a reader.

JPB: We're out there. Whenever I can assign your books, I do! You had mentioned that you were disappointed with the reception of *The Midnight*...

SH: For all my books!

JPB: What sort of legacy do you imagine or wish for?

SH: Just to survive. I'm just really worried about surviving, or anyone reading it, because I actually think most people, it's like I never wrote anything but *My Emily Dickinson*, which I really don't care about. That was my first thing. And then it's *Singularities*, and it seems to me that my work has improved! [laughing]. But everybody always thinks their last work is their best. But I think *The Midnight*, I just thought it was so much... it's an offering to my mother. I don't know what I expected, but it is a difficult book in that there are so many... I sometimes wonder if I should have put the two poems in there. I had to. I don't know about the last, the *Kidnapped*. But anyway.

JPB: Is there something that makes *Kidnapped* different?

SH: Yeah, I do think *Kidnapped*'s different. I don't think it's as... there are some beautiful separate pieces in it, but if I just kept it in the Irish book, and then with all that Dracula stuff, maybe that would have been another way to go. But you see, because of Stevenson, and his book *Kidnapped*, I don't know, what do you think of *Kidnapped*?

JPB: I actually think it belongs. It's different. It's the first time where prose and verse meet in the book, and I think that that needed to happen as a way of resolving that back and forth movement, though of course you get the doubling effect of the Noh. It's not a single narrative still, there's still double vision there, but I think it needs to be there. I think it does provide closure.

SH: I love the last, the end.

JPB: I think that's what I'm thinking of...

SH: "Array." Coming up with that, "awry what I long for array," when I can come up with that, it's pretty good! [laughing] You know, another thing about my mother was, she was a wonderful maker of aphorisms. She could just, God! They all got lost. I don't remember. That's another thing I feel like—women's work, and lacework. Somehow she was just brilliant. An aphorism is... Emily Dickinson's letters, oh my God, the aphorisms, I can't believe them, and it's a miracle that we have them. And obviously some have been lost. She just made them up and sent them out. Surely she must have realized how good they were. I began to think, what is that about women who throw their work out?

JPB: And don't document?

SH: And don't document it. It's an atmosphere about Dickinson that is so... throwing it to the wind, it's not waste garbage, but just seeing loose... not grasping.

JPB: So interesting. The other chapter that I have with Vicuña, I work with her a lot—I don't know if you know her work...

SH: I know, yes I do. Not well, but I do. But I know her, too.

JPB: Well, her *precarios* are these offerings that just often don't last, and they're not really meant to. There's always that tension between the documentation of the object and the making and dispersal of the object, and in some ways the documentation of that object, or even just having the foresight beforehand, of knowing you're going to document it, seems to detract from the energy of the making of the object.

SH: It's all about the making, that would be the pragmatist's way, belief. That's what it's all about. It may be easier for women to imagine than men, I don't know. I don't believe in isolating women against men. I think it's a further ghettoization.

JPB: Yeah. You'll find yourself quickly in a gender essentialist position. But I do want to ask you about that because Marjorie Perloff has her essay and traces the female family line primarily, your mother, your great aunt. And then Gerald Bruns does a similar thing, building a citational reading of all the voices you've included. Much as this does feel like a feminine book to me in many ways, there are these men in the book. They are still there, and I was wondering, how much does gender play a role when you're deciding what voices to let into your text, and if there are any qualitative differences

between the male and female voices? It just so happens in this book that the female voices we hear in this book are often related to you, while the male voices are not.

SH: Except for Uncle John. I would never... I find the people. In other words, finding Stevenson, or using him here, or finding Henry James and [missing] were close, and finding all that information about Oldmsted's mother, say, that kind of thing—they're really chance. I believe in chance. I think chance is a great dictator. I wouldn't, I never set out to say, "I will pick this man." Unless I'm writing about Wallace Stevens or something. And they do tend to be male figures in this book, too. I wouldn't say I'm writing... I really don't believe in isolation.

JPB: It's not women's literature.

SH: I don't want to be considered... the feminism of the old. But I am, it's necessary to. I am. I'm saying I'm not. But I am. I really don't think that ultimately, when it comes down to it, that women are equally treated still in the art world. Certainly in the visual art world. I mean as to who really makes top money, or who really gets art books written about them. I still think it's a problem. And how seriously you may be taken.

JPB: There's something about... someone can point to the lace and say that's domestic, that's women's work, but in another context, in another culture, that could be considered the highest form of production. It's not inherently... but there is such an affinity with those male figures in the book,

in spite of that difference. I think I can guess your thoughts about it, but I wanted to ask about Peirce. It seems from what I have read, you give his definition that he wrote for Nominalism, and say he later comes to abhor it.

SH: Give me the definition again, which are you talking about? The Peirce book?

JPB: Oh, no, it's quoted in here.

SH: I'm still scared of Peirce. I don't want to say anything about his books.

JPB: You don't have to! This is on 48. I'm wondering how nominalism is featured in the book, or where you situate yourself in relation to Peirce's abhorrence...

SH: I'm fascinated, always... I like all these philosophical ideas, and the idea of what's real. The manuscripts represent in their generality nothing in the real thing, but are real conveniences for speaking of many things at once. That fascinates me. I suppose it was Peter who probably told me that he came to abhor it. My whole thing with Peirce, I became fascinated, I got Peirce through the manuscripts. I spent this incredible summer down in a basement, and they're just wildly incredible. Then the life, and the sense that there are these Americans like Melville, Pound, these American thinkers ahead of their time who work away from their audience... that they just get twisted. The whole thing about an American intellectual of that kind of eccentric sort, how there really isn't a place for them, in a way. I just was fascinated by the way...

somehow, I have a little bit about it in my other book. I just identify with Peirce at the end of his life, being cold and lonely, but I got it that way, but I think through him, it really interested me, his life and his fate and these manuscripts. But the Peircian thing that really continues to enthrall me is this idea of firstness and secondness and thirdness, and that related so much to my thinking about Dickinson's manuscripts, and to just writing in general. And thinking—that firstness is being before one has any... just raw, without words, feeling.

JPB: Whatever that is.

SH: Yeah, the thing that you can't... And then secondness, being able to realize you have the thing. And thirdness being when you can express it, but you need thirdness for secondness in that weird... that's one of the things in Peirce, those sort of ideas carry on farther, just are really, really interesting to me. It's interesting in Stein when she writes what are masterpieces... soul of the man, that the minute a word is dead when it is said, that sort of thing. There's another Peirce idea that you must have spontaneity, but at the same time habit is essential. Spontaneity will always turn into habit, but habit will kill spontaneity. That's what makes the world go round, this tension between those two elements. You know, "original" in quotations always. That I find really, really interesting. But that's just a mere... I mean, to a Peircian. I think Peircians, on the other hand, refuse to see how autobiographical, in some way, his graphs are.



JPB: It's strange to miss that. Why do we wish for the removal for the producer from the production? It's an odd impulse that we sometimes have. If Peirce did come to abhor nominalism, it seems like you would be of a similar bent of mind. If nominalism holds that there is nothing particular in the world itself that's attached to the thing in the world, your work seems to run counter to that.

SH: Yeah, that's right. And that's all we have. That's what we have to show us what's there. That's the only trace.

JPB: That's what I thought, and I have the same fear of Peirce!

SH: Oh my God, you can stay off that. Let me warn you. Never, never again! I never met Peter until after the book. I honestly do think that Juliet Peirce with her fortune telling cards, was doing something, It was a miracle!

JPB: You've got Olmsted in there too, and the connection is of course Buffalo and the parks and the landscape, but these figures are both insomniacs.

SH: Oh yeah, well!

JPB: It seems like insomnia in this book puts you in a different mindset, almost like a shadow mind where you can think these things. It changes the way that you can think these things, and you have that definition of "awake." Of course, "awake" is unsleeping, but it's also juxtaposed directly with awakening.

SH: Also a “wake,” when people are dead.

JPB: A wake, exactly. But even awake, can mean to be awake, to be alert, to keep vigil. You can see how quickly it runs toward something spiritual.

SH: Yes. Well, the Buffalo thing is... very important to me in both absolute loathing and love. This is exactly the Peircian thing of spontaneity that happened. You couldn't take two... I'm so intense about passivity. My father went to war, and then to come back when I was fifty and my husband was dying. The landscape, the upper New York landscape, the burnt over district, the area of awakenings. I can understand why it happened up there. There's something about upper New York State that is just haunted. Really. Ithaca, too.

JPB: I know. [laughing]

SH: Something is there. I tend to think it's some ancient Indian curse, or like we did... there's a curse, something there, and Edmund Wilson has a book [on it]. Even the Mormon thing, all these sects started there. It's still incredibly strange, and that park is, for instance, open to the sky in a way that I've never seen any other Olmsted park like that. The sky just comes down into the park in a really thrilling way. I used to walk round and round and round the park for exercise, and I always felt I was walking with my father because of a primal memory of going to the zoo with him and everything, which is in the park.

Now I'm off on the Buffalo thing, but it relates to what you were asking.

JPB: You said that earlier writing seemed angrier to you, and later you felt more meditative. I wondered if there was—in *Kidnapped*, we get that your mother believed that tables moved. You said at the Temple reading, she really did, too! Then there's the speaker who says that she's more skeptical. But I was wondering if there was a kind of awakening here for you in moving through and writing this book. Or was there a kind of peace that came from it?

SH: I really think it was... I look upon it as a happy book, and a kind of peace. Definitely a peace. I put my Buffalo thing in here, in the piece, and somehow maybe I accepted... because the Buffalo thing, it's weird how it's important to the piece, but it is. I kind of laid it to rest. My last book was just... very not easy to write. You know, the one after Peter's death. It was so grim. It's another elegy. I seem to keep writing elegies, but... I think my mother would have had fun with it.

JPB: I think it was a great compromise for someone who believe that tables move without contact.

SH: That includes the love-hate thing with Buffalo. That you can say and believe that tables move without contact, but at the same time you're skeptical. You can't be one thing without the other.

JPB: I thought that this book was the compromise between the two of you, where you have the ghosts, but you also have the contact, the touching of materials, the collage, too. But that collage creates this magical space with ghosts. I thought, it's a good resolution, and now they can talk to each other.

SH: Also on the word, the nominalism thing. The headings of each chapter, each little thing? One ends "pardon," and then the next is Pandora? That's from a tiny shift of the word "pardon" into ... those kind of things were really fun. Or "darn" could be "dark." Of course that's very much my mother.

JPB: The word play, yeah. I don't think I've heard anything better than "Oh hell, let's be angels." That's really good.

SH: I know! It is, it really is! That message. I remember thinking, God, she's 95, and that is a fabulous aphorism. I can't even remember what it was. Also, I wanted her on record, because she comes into the Beckett biography, and people are always saying things about her because of Beckett, but I want her on record because I feel like she's passed over and ignored there.

JPB: That's another interesting aspect of this elegy. It's also an attempt to place on record and make connection—to make a kind of constellation in history between yourself and these other voices, your mother, and to create, how you were saying, a community. One that stays, that is rescued from the margins.

SH: Yes! Yes, well that is... you'll write well on this!

JPB: I hope so. If only I could stop circulating between the secondness and thirdness that Peirce describes. But I will!

## APPENDIX B

### **ON *CLOUD-NET*: A CONVERSATION WITH CECILIA VICUÑA**

JPB: One of the things I'm thinking about in relation to this book is really how much it's about translation, and about dwelling in the trans, about the process of translation between people, between spaces, between times, between media and genres, all kinds of translation—and then emergence, emergence into being, and presence. But to take translation in the most literal of its meanings, I wanted to ask you what it's like to work with Eliot, and what it's like to have a translator, to write in translation, to always be between languages.

CV: The truth is this: I don't really have a translator now, and so I have worked with many different translators. Working with Eliot was truly wonderful because Eliot decided that he wanted to translate my work, and then he discovered that it was untranslatable. And that's what appeals to him. So the process went more or less like this: he first created what he thought the poem was about, and showed it to me. And I said, "No, this is not what's happening in the poem" and I would start speaking. And from my speech, he could translate what he thought related to the poem. So it was a very multi-layered and multi-dimensional level, where my conversation and my speech took even more importance than my written script, because the particular poems that he was translating are from this Vicuna book, where I have constrained each line, usually to just two words that are in contradiction with each other. So from the conflict emerged a new reality. And so it seems that from that

condensation in the poetry, this process with him unfolded. And then in turn when I read or I perform that, the emergence or transformation of the text continues. Because in oral performance, I add or eliminate or repeat—or, in other words, it's like the different versions continue to grow.

JPB: And when you make those adjustments when you're reading—how do you decide to make those adjustments?

CV: In the moment, in the moment. What guides it is usually a form of music that I hear. I hear a sound, and I try to get closer to it.

JPB: How about when you're actually starting to write the poems, the versions in Spanish. You said that the translations come from sound and come from your speaking, and when you start to write in Spanish, is it also the case that you start by speaking, or do you start by writing?

CV: Well, I think writing is a very mysterious process, because you cannot pin down exactly where it comes from. I think it comes from a form of listening. You're listening to something that's not exactly words, it's not exactly concepts. It's, for example, some indigenous poetry refers to it as a cloud. And I think that's a very appropriate image. It's like you feel it like the approach of a cloud, and you try to be in it. And the words are usually very clumsy. And it's very hard to attain in the words that intangible quality which, at the same time, is completely physical because it is so vivid and so real that it's unmistakable. It's not like anything else. It can not be construed to be this or that, it's something that has such a quality, such a presence that is

completely precise. So how can it be so totally precise, so your ear has to be refined, refined, refined, to the point of becoming acute, you know, to the point of becoming, you know, as participatory and playful—because at the same time, it's not a passive event at all. It's not that you're hearing something that's coming to you. You are also taking part in it. And you may say the wrong thing or you may write the wrong thing. And so that causes it to transform itself. So it's really like an engagement in a dialogue that is... truly mysterious.

JPB: Mysterious because the other participant in the dialogue is...?

CV: ...is poetry itself! And so where is poetry coming from? Poetry comes from itself. It has a life of its own. And I think you, as a poet, you participate in her life. You engage with her.

JPB: I notice that you gender poetry.

CV: Yeah, yeah. In Spanish it's very easy to do that because we say "la poesia." In English it probably sounds completely inappropriate, but I couldn't say "he." I couldn't say "it," because "it" is very impersonal. I am not a real English speaker, so my understanding of English is limited, but it seems to me that "it"...

JPB: ...that indicates an object and distance...



CV: ...”it” indicates “not animated.” But I don’t believe—for me, everything’s animated. I don’t believe in the possibility of inanimation, you see? And now we know that even minerals... I mean, everything that was always thought to be inanimate... that is an obsolete concept. And so “it” will either change, or it will become obsolete too.

JPB: I wanted ask you, is your sense of—how do you experience language in general? What senses do you use? Is it tactile? Visual? Are words tactile?

CV: I think language is the exchange, so it’s neither of that and it is all of that. Because, what are the qualities of the exchange? The exchange between realities, between elements, between forces, is what becomes language. Or is it the other way around? Is it language that generates the exchange? It’s very hard to tell. We know that the exchange is happening, and this is... in indigenous thinking, this is the reciprocal exchange, which happens to be the same notion in quantum physics. So what is language? Language, I think, is what happens in between. In between two elements, in between two forces, between you and me. And that is what makes it alive.

JPB: Do you think that it has—I’m thinking about whether words have physical, material properties. We often think of them as sounds as passing through ether, or letters on a page are usually pointing to somewhere else. They don’t have a body of their own. But in *cloud-net*, you see all kinds of examples where language takes on, for example, in the quipu or the woolen skeins that you have... language is very physical there.

CV: Yeah, exactly. I think language can be completely physical, can be completely tactile. Remember, I was saying, it's all of that, and it's none of that. Simultaneously. And that is what is hard to get through the Western categorization style. Because it is completely tactile when it becomes, for example, a thread. A thread is language. This is not a metaphor. This is so. But simultaneously, a thread is not a thread. So whatever you describe or you define resists the definition.

JPB: ...like two sides of the same coin...

CV: Right. And every definition is a form of resistance simultaneously, because it doesn't want to be that. And so you have to allow for the two sides, like you just said.

JPB: I think that in Western culture we pay so much attention to the non-physical properties of language, to the extent that that becomes how we think of language. And one of the beautiful things about *cloud-net* is that it insists on seeing the other side of that coin. And I was wondering if you could talk about what having physical language can do for people?

CV: Yeah. Well, I was a young girl... I was 17 years old, I guess, and this I describe in a book that hasn't been translated, that's been published in a few editions in other languages, but not in English. I suddenly saw a word as if it were a creature, entering into the visual space of my room. And I could see it act, separate, and move, and dance. I didn't think it was an object. I didn't think it was a creature. I didn't think any of that. But I was witnessing

language alive and dancing in front of me and having fun with my understanding it. So this mutual exchange between language and me was for me something so vivid that I started laughing. And I laughed so loud that my father, who was two rooms away from the house, came to my room to find out what I was laughing about.

JPB: Your father's a lawyer too, right?

CV: Right. And so he said, "what are you laughing about?" And I said, "I am seeing words." "Oh!" he said. "This girl..." So this completely, you can say it was almost like a physical relationship, even though this was in the realm of the invisible. But the realm of the invisible and the realm of the visible is a fuzzy one. And for me, it was completely fuzzy. I grew up that way. I was left alone. I grew up in the countryside, and my parents didn't take a lot of notice of me. So I was left alone a lot. So I was a lot with animals and, you know, playing with water and things like that in nature, so I had this incredibly rich, multidimensional relationship with a place. I could engage in conversations with all kinds of things. So you see for me, to experience language that way was somehow to be continually in that same space where I had been when I was completely free as a young girl. And I continue to experience language like that. Today, at any given moment, I just have to let myself be, and "pop."

JPB: When you're working a project like *cloud-net*, clearly it's a very collaborative project from that start, of necessity—you need the help of a translator, you need the help of people hanging the gallery, you need the help of curators. So it's already a project much about collaboration because it's so

multipart and diverse. And I was wondering, how do you think about yourself in relation to your audience, or to other people who participate in the project? What's your sense of your authorship?

CV: My "offership"? Authorship, okay. I heard "offership." What a beautiful expression. I think this is also a very fuzzy question because who is really the author of these things, you know? For example, in the particular case of *cloud-net*, it was a really beautiful thing because all of a sudden as I tell the story—I think I tell the story in the book—three curators show up and tell me you have to think of something. And so it was really like they wanted something. So all I had to do was respond. So I think my principal activity is to become receptive and respond to what comes. You remember the story of how it happened. I suddenly saw this image, and a little while after that I extended my arm and I encountered the same image in a 500-page book.

JPB: *Savitri*.

CV: Right! If I showed you the place, the corner where that happened, it has a zillion books, I mean, probably 200 books, and why did my hand pick that book? You see, so that's what I mean by being receptive and responsive. Somebody initiates... it's like in quantum physics, there is someone that's a measurer. The person who puts the question... in this case it's the curators who put the question. What was the question? What could be an art that could be a hinge between the two worlds? The world of the past, meaning in this century, and the century that's coming forth—the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That was the question they posed. And so, I didn't think of it. Because if I would have

thought of it, it would have been overwhelming or puzzling or impossible, you know? And so I just sat down and I go empty and “pop.”

JPB: It's a pretty good answer that came up. The reason I ask [about your authorship] is because people have called you “shamantistic” and “visionary” and “didactic,” and I was wondering if any of the roles felt like they rung true for you. But you seem much more open to being receptive rather than leading everything and controlling everything. You couldn't, anyway, with a project like this...

CV: Right. I think being receptive is a very active thing. When an image comes, you have to know to act on it. You have to become the measurer in that moment. You have to know that that's the right image. So you have to open yourself completely, but at the same time you're driving the choice. So when that interaction is set in motion, the dialogue, the exchange, and the language begins to show itself. So, for example, you ask in a collaboration... let's say, for example, I did this collaborative performance at the pier, right here, a few blocks from here. And so my method when I work in a collective performance like that one is I do not give any instruction. I invited 10 people, and only three people showed up.

JPB: ...those three girls...

CV: Those three girls, those three girls. And I pass on a thread and I say let's go there. And so I give them a piece of thread and I begin dancing. And they either pick it up or they do not pick it up. I do the same with the filmmaker. I

don't tell him or her anything. So I think that when I become empty and receptive and I start playing with it—which is being active and receptive, active and receptive, simultaneously—I allow others to act in the same form. And therefore, the art emerges. The art happens. All kinds of things happen. So for example one of the things that happens in the video is there are the two World Trade Center towers, and I go like that with my hands in front of them, and that happened in the performance. But when I'm editing it, I'm placing the poem on top of the image. When that image shows up, the poem says "we will all go away." And it's the World Trade Towers. I mean, who has that knowledge? The poem itself, you see. The moment itself. Whatever was happening in this opening space where we were all being playful and receptive, and we were in a public space where this is forbidden. So, for example, all of a sudden some people wanted—bikers, wanted—

JPB: I love the woman on the bike—"is this a booby trap?"

CV: Right. Some people immediately enjoy the play and go under the thread or above the thread. And some get angry. Everybody has a very active participation.

JPB: It's so amazing to see the bodies of those girls interacting with the wool. For me, when I look at it, it really materializes the connection, draws the connection between each body dancing. It's like the wool is this cord of energy that runs between everyone. And their movements are moving it up and down, and it's just incredible.

CV: Yeah, it's very beautiful, and you see, it was speechless. But the image I had, and what was bringing it forth for me, I was seeing, as you know, for example, you have a textile, and you have images in the textile. This was a living textile, and so the persons inside are as if it were, you know, they are inside the warp and inside the weft, so they're part of it. So it was the most beautiful thing because... I think, I don't know if they verbalize it like that, but I am sure they felt part of this living organism that's moving in that fashion.

JPB: One of the things that I'm so interested about in this work is the fact that those connections and that language and linguistic exchange become materialized between different bodies. It seems like it's proposing a more democratic—you can tell me if I'm wrong—exchange, a more democratic dialogue in which everyone comes forth into being. It's funny because different Western philosophers have considered touch to be the basest and the lowest of the senses because most organisms have it. Whereas sight is really privileged. But the funny thing about touch is that it's spread throughout the body, it's a whole-body sensation. It is base in the sense that it's foundational—everyone has it—so I'm just wondering, do you think that the kind of language that you're making in *cloud-net*... is it teaching us ethical exchange between subjectivities? Or?

CV: Certainly, certainly. Because if you admit the poetic principle of reality to be exchange, then there's no base qualities in touch and high qualities in sight. Because both are forms of exchange. And so if you admit that what is really happening between all of us is a form of exchange, and that that exchange is the art, there is a profound political and ethical quality to that

understanding. And this is the understanding that was universal for thousands of years in ancient cultures, and it is so in contemporary indigenous cultures. That is it the exchange that matters. And that is the base of quality. That is the base of justice. It's the base of fairness. Because everyone wants to be treated right. And what is happening in the exchange? In the exchange, it is that or it is not that. I mean, there are degrees, but basically there is a good way of exchanging, and a way that's abusive, that's controlling, that's commanding. And now, for example, we know things so basic, like, for example, if I tell you what to do, your neural system immediately goes into rebellion.

JPB: I can believe that!

CV: But if I invite you to come play with me, your neural system goes into pleasure right away! I mean, we are built by a zillion years of evolution for a playful exchange, and if we believe that justice will unfold from exacting those principles, this is truly the philosophical and ethical content of my work. And I'm very glad that you see it, because if you don't see that, what do you see? You see, you know...

JPB: Yeah, I think you would see white lines crossing. It's a shame—when I was at the MOMA today, person after person would glance at Eva Hesse's fiberglass tubes. They would glance and pass, glance and pass. And I thought, "Wait! Stop and look at these!" I think you would miss out on quite a lot.



I'm just wondering—does *cloud-net*... Sometimes my professors tell me that I'm too credulous and that I'm too—they're going to hear this tape and laugh—that I'm too much the poet sometimes in my critical work—they're always saying," you know, you can be more critical of these poets," but I also find that difficult when I believe in their work. And when I believe in what their work is telling me...

CV: Can I answer you right away? Your professors are wrong. Because when you believe in a poet you're being critical of the system. You're being critical of the philosophical system that forces you to be critical and not empathetic to the work, when the true requirement of poetry... poetry wants the reader to participate empathetically. If academy has evolved a form of looking at poetry critically, it's a way of controlling poetry. And you by resisting that, you are being critical of the system of knowledge.

JPB: ...and getting in trouble doing it...

CV: Of course, because the academy is against that principle. So you have to compromise while you're in the academy, but the minute you're free of the academy, you have to follow the most important literary critics in the history of literary criticism... have always been free thinkers. Free of that constraint and that force. Look at the people that you read. I read critical essays all the time, but of the other kind. Where the author has become a poet him- or herself. And that is the one that lasts. It's the only one that can be read after ten years, after twenty years, after fifty, or four-hundred or two thousand years.

JPB: I keep thinking about poetry that does things in the world and that makes things happen, because that seems like one of the main reasons one would want to spend their life with poetry... and some people (especially my students) look at the things that I read and that I look at, and then ask, “well, how does that change things, how does that make things happen?” I have an idea, but I wonder if you could say—

CV: Of course it changes. I completely agree with you that there is art and poetry that does something in the world. And that’s the art and the poetry that matters, and continues to matter for thousands of years after it has been created. And why is that? Because such art and such poetry engages in this exchange I was describing to you with poetry it or herself. Or with art it or herself. And by doing that it allows everybody to experience that. And when you allow that experience, your perceptual outlook, your worldview, can shift. And we know now that the world is perception. So you change the experience, you change the perception, and you’re changing, really, the world. So then it’s up to the reader to follow up, to take the consequence of the poetry. But what happens is that by the rest of the world, by deciding that poetry and art have no consequence, are sort of clipping its wings, are trying to keep it in the corner, so it doesn’t have the ability to change the world. So this is what they do generation after generation, but then there’s always the rebel student that has this instinct that this cannot be so. Because when you’re left to your own devices and you read a poem—the poem moves you to the core—it moves your blood—it moves your heartbeat—it moves your... everything in your body relates to it in such a way that you are physically

transformed! And that is how you know... for example, Borges said, “how do you know that a poem is a poem?” He says, “because you feel in front of the poem like you feel in front of the sea.” It’s unmistakable. When you are in front of the sea, it’s not like you’re in the desert!

JPB: It’s really interesting to hear you talk about this idea of, so forcefully, about poetry working in the world. I think *cloud-net* does that, in part because of how multi-faceted it is, how collaborative and participatory it is. How tangible it is. The ideas operate as metaphor and symbol, but there is really that concrete aspect of it that people can engage with it directly. Where else can you manipulate the poet’s language and work so directly? Literally, in your hands. But it really is a tough problem for a critic, too, when you find a work like this because there’s so much to deal with. You almost have to be especially educated—and it is a very accessible work in one sense—but if you’re going to be a critic, you also have to have a special education in visual arts, in poetics and poetry, to work on something like this. The question that strikes me is, what do I call this? Is there even a name for what this is? And I wonder how you think about a project like this? Are all its parts and pieces really just a continuum of something larger? And can we call that body— do we call that poetry, or what do we call that?

CV: Yeah, I know what you mean. It is true that because the work is so multi-dimensional, it requires an equally multi-dimensional reader to really grasp it. That is number one. Then how do you call it? You certainly have to call it in a way that describes what it does. Dennis Tedlock for example, said once, about my work, that my work was poïesis in the original sense of poïesis,

which is bringing to life—creating out of nothing. It's not really out of nothing. Creating. Because nothing, what is nothing? We don't really know. And so for me, it is, *cloud-net*, it is as if it were... you know the image, the image is the cloud that's enveloping the world, protecting it against global warming. So therefore, it is an image, and just the image itself by existing, it's already acting. So it is an active image, and that, for me is poetry. It's an image... and the word image is already an action...

JPB: I think that's what people miss sometimes. That to imagine something or to image something, something already changes by having done that.

CV: Certainly.

JPB: Even if what's picture is impossible.

CV: Exactly, exactly. And so that is already contained in the word image—that incredibly active quality of the exchange. Getting back to the image, I am sitting down in my corner, and I suddenly see this image. This image—what is it—it's the will of the earth itself, it's our will to take care of it. Where is this coming from, and where is it going to? You see, because an image has power, has a force. And I think it's coming from love. And it's going towards love. And then, what is love? Love is life itself. So that is what makes it poetry. That however you name it, the name always contains an unnamable within it. An unknowable within the knowing. Therefore the name for it is a form of poetry, but it's a form of poetry that happens simultaneously in space,

in the street, in the book, in the reading—it cannot be contained, because it’s there, it’s alive!

JPB: The next problem that asserts itself, and probably because it’s alive, is—do you think that something like *cloud-net* has a beginning? An end?

CV: Mmm. Who knows? Obviously, I mean, if we were to go by linear understanding, it started with Aurobindo the moment he wrote that wonderful compound, “cloud-net.” But on the other hand, does it really begin with him? If you go back to ancient cultures, you will always find images that relate to the weaving of clouds, or the weaving of water. So there is something in the human imagination that seems to be somehow connected to a field where we all have access to... once we become receptive to it, once we engage it. Because how do images show up in completely different contexts, in completely different cultures? And it’s not that you have read them. See, the image came to me, and then I found the book. And it is very important, the sequence. Because if I had first read it, and “ah, what a clever thing,” it couldn’t have had the power to unfold itself in this form and in that form, and it couldn’t touch the girls, and then the curators, and then the people who hung it... you see, this quality that doesn’t belong to anyone is what makes it poetry.

JPB: Amazing.

CV: [laughter]

JPB: This kind of poetry is so much about presence, about the here and now, something that's touchable and something that people change. Maybe it's not important, but somebody like me wasn't there to see the installation, so for a whole mass of your readers—including my students when I assign the book—there are certain parts of *cloud-net* that are simply untouchable and absent. And that absence is set off by the fact that the book itself is about presence. You become even more aware of the fact that certain aspects are off limits to you. Do you think about those readers? Does it matter that certain parts...

CV: Yeah. It is a puzzling and a confounding thing in the sense that when you are in front of presence, in the moment of composition or in the moment of performance, which for me is also the moment of composition, or in the moment of writing—all those moments when you are in front of presence, you know that presence has, as poetry itself, this quality that is and isn't at the same time, that you can grasp it and it's ungraspable. So I guess that if you admit that in your own experience, you have to admit that that will always be part of the process. So if the poem is printed, the reader, each time any reader comes to a poem, you have that experience. The experience of it is and it isn't. Look at how many times you have read a poem, and it is an entirely different experience—because you're less open or you're more open, because you're distracted or because you're angry, because of this or because of that—and I have had the experience of reading a poem for forty years and suddenly feeling like I have understood it for the first time!

JPB: I'm glad to hear you say that!

CV: And it is something so extraordinary! What does it depend upon? It depends upon these very delicate variables of your mind... it's a delicate thing. So of course I would love for readers to have it on the web, so they can see all kinds of angles and all kinds of pictures and have a good film and all that. But, for example, Rosa Alacala, who writes about my work, says that in my work itself and for forty years, 90% of my work is not documented, is not filmed, is not photographed...

JPB: ...that breaks my heart... don't tell me that...

CV: You know, it is true. So she asked me, "is that a will of yours?" And it is not a conscious will. For example, when I had a performance at the *cloud-net*, at the gallery, not the one in the street, there was a filmmaker filming, it all came out black. So there is some quality in the work, or some quality in me, or in the combination of both... that makes the work want to be hard to get or hard to manifest.

JPB: It's sad for me personally, but...

CV: Yeah, for me too! I would love to have the whole experience unfold and be present in a more available way. I would love it. But at the same time I have to accept that it may not be so...

JPB: Well, there's just certain requirements for it.

CV: For example, now, the book is probably out of print. Who would want to do it again?

JPB: Well, we'll work on that. I think it's a pretty important book. I really do.

CV: Thank you so much. And I have to tell you that at one point I was at the Villagio... you know the Villagio? It's a wonderful place in Italy. It's like an artist's residence, and they bring artists and scientists together. And I remember there was a very extraordinary weather scientist, an ecologist working with global warming, and she said to me, "this is truly an important book and all scientists should read it... because it tells scientists what all scientists know but don't want to name. Like, this is a living organism." And all the qualities in *cloud-net*, she said, "this is what the world needs to hear." She told me that. Because we as scientists cannot communicate it. Because people are so afraid of the language of science... like they are in front of Eva Hesse and cannot connect with it. That's how she felt about science, that people don't wish to connect. They have a block. And she said, "with your book, any one can connect to this feeling of love." She said, "the entire weather system of this earth works through exchange. A force comes from the sun, the earth responds. A force comes from oxygen, hydrogen responds." So she said, "Your understanding of this continuous exchange is true. This book is objective. This book is not a subjective act of poetry. This is an objective truth that you have manifested."

JPB: I think so. It's a shame that certain parts of the project didn't come to fruition, like the website. Was that because of technical difficulties, or?



CV: Yes, I had a website person, and this person disappeared, and moved to a new job where he cannot work with artists anymore. So I have lost my webmaster. I need another webmaster.

JPB: What had you imagined before?

CV: Well, I had imagined a way in which you could, for example, have the little media that you could download, and if not complete, at least a part of it. And then you could have a very beautiful slideshow because I have tons of images. And these images could give you some of the aspects of the installations. I have lots of wonderful black and white pictures. I have very beautiful images...

JPB: It would be so important to have that work disseminated.

So, I saw that you've got a new show now, in Chile—I don't think I'm going to make it, unfortunately. But I'm wondering... I know where you've been, I've seen *Saborami*, I have the Beau Geste edition now. I bought it... I found it in London.

CV: Really?

JPB: Yeah, I had it shipped to me.

CV: That's fantastic. How much did you pay?

JPB: Um, 80 dollars.

CV: That's super-cheap! That's fantastic!

JPB: I know that!

CV: Wooooow!

JPB: It was a Christmas present for myself.

CV: You found it in a bookstore?

JPB: It was online, in an antiquarian bookstore.

CV: That's fantastic. That makes me very happy.

JPB: There are only 250 or 500 copies of it, right?

CV: Right, 250 copies.

JPB: So I decided to try to get my hands on one of them. And I did. So I've seen that book is so interesting, as so many of the forms and concerns are carried forward. Even though the tone is quite different from *cloud-net*, actually. That book is fierce, you know? And really confrontational in some places. And uneasy. Whereas *cloud-net* seems to be... it is a book of

resistance too, but it seems the tone is more gentle, the way that it's done. I wonder, actually, was there anything that helped you shift in that direction?

CV: Yeah, well, first of all you have to put the *Saborami* in context. You see, to understand that book you can read Naomi Klein, this book called *The Shock Doctrine*. This book tells what the military coup in Chile actually was. It's one of the few books that tell it straight. Why is it that the military coup in Chile killed, and what it killed. It killed a form of participatory democracy because it was threatening to the system because it was successful. And so when the coup happened, I knew that with my blood. So, I was a witness to the killing... the killing that destroyed many people in my family to this day. Some were killed and disappeared, some were tortured, and some were destroyed morally, spiritually, emotionally. Forever. The extraordinary thing was that I was twenty-four years old, and I knew, there was no mistake in my heart and body as to what that meant. So that fierceness you feel, that brutal pain, was completely alive and uncensored. Then, you have to consider that between that and *cloud-net*, like thirty years go by. And in those thirty years, I have done so much meditation and so much opening to what is it in us that brings this violence, that brings this brutality? So I think that *cloud-net* comes from the other side. From understanding that only by being truly receptive and aware of the beauty of the exchange... that only that is healing. So I learned very early on that... for example, when the military coup happened, it was such a brutal shock to Chilean artists and Chilean poets, that a huge silence happened in our culture that went on for ten years. Very few things were published or written that were relevant.

JPB: I know your books were banned, is that right?

CV: Yeah. And I am actually banned in a way to this day in Chile. Even though they reprinted the *Saborami*, for example, they reprinted it last year in Chile, but it is a completely invisible book. Nobody reads about it. Nobody...

JPB: I've seen it. It's quite a different object.

CV: They did not respect it. They asked my permission to do it, and I said, my God, Chileans have not seen my book in 40 years—okay, I will grant them permission. I can show it to you. If you put the two books together, it's an outrage what they did. But I accepted it, with my imagination that Chileans will be able to read it. In was completely wrong. Because what happened is that Chileans have now a completely different mindset. They are completely brainwashed. And so whatever happened in Chile and with the military coup is of no interest to Chileans. Therefore I, and my art, are irrelevant to Chileans. So I allowed that book with the hope that it could have a readership. It didn't work that way. It has no readership in Chile. So now an American publisher wants to do it the right way. And I am so happy about that.

JPB: Like a facsimile edition?

CV: Yeah, like it was meant to be. The Chilean way is really sad. But it shows... I don't think Chileans have come to terms collectively with what the coup amounted to in terms of worldview. So therefore me and people like me... it's like they look at me but, hello? You're not there.

JPB: The second part of my question was, where do you think your work is going? And I'm shocked to hear... do you feel like you don't have an audience in Chile?

CV: No. I don't have an audience... yet. But I feel something truly beautiful... this show is curated by a girl who is maybe 30 years old. The publisher who did *Saborami* is also 30 years old. So there is a new generation of curators and publishers who at least admit that I exist. And that's a beginning. So I think the likelihood of Chile coming to terms with what I just said is remote, now, but everything can change any moment. Because this illusion that Chile's now part of the first world, that Chile is now a modern country, that Chile is now a country of success and money... is an illusion. It's not grounded in an economic reality, or in any kind of... it's just... what's the word?

JPB: A façade?

CV: Yes, a façade. If the world crises goes deeper, or if any wrong moves happen...

JPB: ...it will be stripped away...

CV: Exactly, and so when that happens, a chance will come up for people to see a lot of things that they don't want to see now.

## WORKS CITED

- "About Oysi." *Oysi*. Oysi, 2010. Web. 22 Feb. 2011. <<http://www.oysi.org/>>.
- Apollinaire, Guillaume. "The New Spirit and the Poets." *Selected Writings*. New York: New Directions, 1971. 227-37. Print.
- Ascher, Marcia. "Reading Khipu: Labels, Structure, and Format." *Narrative Threads*. Eds. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton. Austin: U of Texas P, 2002. 87-102. Print.
- Bernstein, Charles. "Frame-Lock." *My Way: Speeches and Poems*. Chicago: U of Chicago P. Print.
- Bruns, Gerald. "Voices of Construction: On Susan Howe's Poetry and Poetics (A Citational Ghost Story)." *Contemporary Literature* 50.1 (2009): 28-53. Print.
- Carson, Anne. *Nox*. New York: New Directions, 2010. Print.
- Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung. *Apparatus, Cinematographic Apparatus: Selected Writings*. New York: Tanam P, 1980. Print.
- . *Dictee*. Berkeley: U of Berkeley P, 2001. Print.
- Classen, Constance. *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*. New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Frances, Richard. "Cecilia Vicuna." *Artforum International* 38.2 (1999): 148. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 16 Feb. 2011.
- Greenberg, Clement. "American-Type Painting." *Art and Culture*. Boston: Beacon P, 1958. 208-229. Print.
- Hagstrum, Jean. *The Sister Arts*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1958. Print.
- Hamilton, Anne. *myein*. Art installation. 1999. American Pavilion, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.

- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Walter Shewring. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Hoptman, Laura. "The Vision." *cloud-net*. New York: Art In General, 1999. 10-13. Print.
- Howe, Susan. *Bed Hangings*. New York: Granary, 2001. Print.
- . *Bed Hangings II*. Tipperary: Coracle, 2002. Print.
- . *Kidnapped*. Tipperary: Coracle, 2002. Print.
- . *The Midnight*. New York: New Directions, 2003. Print.
- . "Speaking with Susan Howe." Interview. Conducted by Janet Ruth Falon. *Difficulties* 3.2 (1989): 35-42. Print.
- Keller, Lynn. "An Interview with Susan Howe." Conducted by Keller Lynn. *Contemporary Literature* 36 (1995): 1-34. Print.
- Krauss, Rosalind. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field." *October* 8 (1979): 30-44. Print.
- Kruger, Kathryn Sullivan. *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna UP, 2001. Print.
- Lee, Kung Jong. "Rewriting Hesiod, Revisioning Korea: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* as a Subversive Hesiodic Catalogue of Women." *College Literature* 33.3 (2006): 77-99. Print.
- Lynd, Juliet. "Precarious Resistance: Weaving Opposition in the Poetry of Cecilia Vicuña." *PMLA* 120.3 (2003): 1588-1607. Print.
- MacDonald, George. *At the Back of the North Wind*. Philadelphia: David McKay, 1919. Print.
- Marinetti, F. T. "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature." *Critical Writings: New Edition*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. 123. Print.

- . "Tactilism: A Futurist Manifesto." *Critical Writings: New Edition*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006. 370-81. Print.
- . *Zang Tumb Tumb*. Edizioni Futuriste di "Poesia": Milan, 1914.
- Martin, Catherine. "'Double Play of Double Meaning': Dreams, Repetition, and the Importance of the Noh in Susan Howe's *The Midnight*." *Textual Practice* 20. 4 (2006): 759-75. Print.
- "Midnight." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2000.
- Mouth to Mouth*. Dir. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha. New York: Electronic Arts Intermix, 2000.
- "myein installation in Venice." art21. Youtube. 2001. Web. 20 Jul. 2011.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "'The Rattle of Statistical Traffic': Citation and Found Text in Susan Howe's *The Midnight*." *boundary 2* 36.3 (2009): 205-228. Print.
- Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. B. Jowett. New York: Random House, n.d. Print.
- Pound, Ezra. *ABC of Reading*. New York: New Directions, 1960. Print.
- Reckin, Ann. "Cecilia Vicuña's *Cloud-Net*." *How2* 1.5 (2001). Web. 11 Apr. 2009.
- <[http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online\\_archive/v1\\_5\\_2001/current/alerts/reckin.html](http://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_5_2001/current/alerts/reckin.html)>.
- Reznikoff, Charles. *Testimony*. New York: New Directions, 1965. Print.
- Rosenberg, Harold. "The American Action Painters." *The Tradition of the New*. 23-39. New York: Da Capo Press, 1994. Print.
- Sacks, Peter. *The English Elegy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1985. Print.
- Schenck, Celeste M. "Feminism and Deconstruction: Re-Constructing the Elegy." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5.1 (1986): 13-2. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. Print.



---. *Macbeth*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997. Print.

Steinberg, Leo. "Other Criteria." *Other Criteria*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007. 55-92. Print.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *A Child's Garden of Verses*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1885. Print.

---. *The Master of Ballantrae*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909. Print.

Stewart, Susan. "On the Art of the Future." *The Open Studio*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2005. Print.

Vicuña, Cecilia. "A Conversation with Cecilia Vicuña: on *cloud-net*." Personal interview. 28 May 2009. Print.

---. *cloud-net*. Art installation. 1998-99. Art in General, New York; Diverseworks Artspace, Houston; and Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center, Buffalo.

---. *cloud-net*. New York: Art In General, 1999. Print.

---. *Living Khipu*. Art installation and performance. 2008. Cornell University, Ithaca.

---. *Quipoem*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1997. Print.

---. *El quipu menstrual*. Art installation and performance. 2006. Centro Cultural Palacio de La Moneda, Santiago.

---. *Saborami*. Cullumpton: Beau Geste Presse, 1973. Print.

---. "What Art May Be." *Chain* 9 (2002): 112-24. Print.

Urton, Gary. "An Overview of Spanish Colonial Commentary on Andean Knotted-String Records." *Narrative Threads*. Eds. Jeffrey Quilter and Gary Urton. Austin: U of Texas P, 2002. 3-25. Print.

---. "Quipu: Knotting Account in the Inka Empire." *Quipu: Contar Anudando en el Imperio Inka*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2003. 47-57. Print.

Wong, Shelley Sunn. "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*." *Writing Self, Writing Nation*. Eds. Norma Alarcón and Elaine H. Kim. Berkeley: Third Women Press, 1994. Print.

Yeats, William Butler. *Later Poems*. New York: Macmillan Co., 1924. Print.

Z, Pamela. "BodySynth." n.d. Web. 11 Jul. 2011.

<<http://www.pamelaz.com/bodysynth.html>>

---. *Voci*. Performance. San Francisco, 2003.

de Zegher, Catherine, ed. *The Precarious: The Art and Poetry and Cecilia Vicuña*. Hanover: UP of New England, 1997. 46-57. Print.